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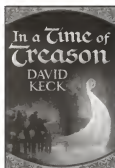


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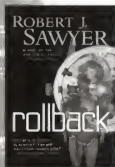
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We start off this issue with a story that isn't actually science fiction or fantasy. Nonetheless, we think you'll like "The Boarder." This piece of historical fiction fits in with the growing body of works like Andy Duncan's "The Chief Designer" and Ellen Klages's "The Green Glass Sea" that view the scientific changes of the Twentieth Century through a lens of fiction. Mr. Jablovkov, who is of Russian descent, assures us that the story is wholly fictional; in fact, he says that in researching the story, he had to find a vintage issue of Playboy, just so he could look at the ads.

# The Boarder

By Alexander Jablovkov



COUPLE OF YEARS AFTER

I was born, my parents bought the house where they still live. Before they even moved in, they had arranged for a boarder to rent the small room in the basement. They had decided, in a fairly formal way, that, as Russians with extra rooms, they should take in boarders. Neither had ever had an extra room.

So they put lace curtains on the basement windows and installed a bathroom with a thundering exhaust fan and a tiled shower stall whose grout reliably turned black every summer. It was my job to scrub it out with a toothbrush. The room had a narrow bed with an embroidered cover, and dark icons of several nondescript saints, bought at a church sale from a glum anti-Semite who also tried to sell us copies of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* from a box under his table.

It was not an appealing room, but they seemed to have no trouble finding tenants. The first was a princess. An actual princess, some collateral of the Trubetskoys, born in Paris, her transliterated name ending in a scrolled double "f," rather than the prosaic, anglo-phonetic

"v" of ours. My parents, both products of the Soviet intelligentsia, were fascinated by aristocrats, even ones whose father had made ends meet by becoming a haberdasher. Princess Anna snored loudly and had the most impressive eyebrows I had ever seen. She always sighed over my mother's food, though she could never articulate, in her exaggerated Petersburg accent, what it was she was looking for. I don't think anyone really missed her when she left a few months later, to move in with a friend of hers, a duchess, in Brooklyn. She thought herself literary and was given to observations like: "Always read Turgenev in French. He makes much more sense that way. Some people prefer Shakespeare in French also, but I really do think that his cragginess shows off better in the original Russian."

Some time later came the Little Green Man, a skinny, intense guy, an ex-Army Ranger or Green Beret or Navy Seal, I was never quite sure, who was studying Chinese at the University of Chicago.

He believed it was possible to become invisible. He learned every board in the house and could slip through without making a sound. After he moved out, my mother found that he had kept a bag of cedar bark mulch in his bedroom, to cover up his steps in the flower beds.

The night he earned his name, my parents had some friends over. I don't remember them, but I do remember their daughter, Maureen. She was a couple of years older than I, fourteen or fifteen, and wore a short skirt and a loose top. I was all over her, offering drinks, snacks, tours of the house. After some pestering from me she agreed to meet me out at the end of the block, past the shrubs, for...I hadn't really thought it through, but already knew that thinking it through was what kept you from getting it done. She resumed her collapsed stare. For her, each second went by like a swallow of dry bread.

Then she shrieked, "A little green man!" and pointed. We caught a glimpse of a startled face painted in shades of camouflage amid the rhododendrons. He dove through the basement window and was gone. Maureen had hysterics and insisted on leaving. She forgot all about her agreement with me. Thinking about it now, I realize that she had someone else to meet, and that the LGM's appearance in the shrubbery was a godsend that kept her from having to fake an epileptic fit or something.

Still, my feelings were hurt. The LGM later married a nice Vietnamese girl and they now own a small tax accounting firm in Downers Grove, not far from my parents' house.

Vassily moved in not long after that. He was, in his way, much stealthier than the LGM. He just appeared one morning at breakfast, smearing jam on a chunk of bread and peering at an already coffee-stained issue of *Iron Age*, a steel-industry trade magazine. Too-large bites at his bread revealed teeth made of various alloys, which revealed his profession, though I did not know it then. He did not acknowledge me. My parents, somehow following his lead, also pretended I was not there. I only learned his name a day or so later, by which time various of his possessions had made their way into the living room, and even into my closet. I complained about the gigantic leather bag that took up residence amid my sneakers, but no one listened to me.

My parents wanted me to learn Russian, so they had me read Russian children's books. There were no non-Soviet Russian children's books, so I found myself imbibing gentle political indoctrination along with my stories of impudent Pioneers improvising solutions to their dilemmas, and became a sentimental Soviet, longing for tram cars, red neck kerchiefs, and Lenin portraits at the fronts of schoolrooms.

I cringe now to think of how pompously insistent I was on the wonders of the people's paradise: the free health care, the fine education, the rights of women, the spotless and prompt public transportation. No wonder it was months before Vassily could even acknowledge my presence.

Vassily had an urban Russian's facility for gardening in a small space. He dug up a stretch of weedy grass along the side picket fence. Most of both summers he lived with us were spent out there, growing odd, dark varieties of tomato, lumpy rustic cucumbers, beans you could buy by the pound for almost nothing at the store.

His gardening outfit consisted of a beat-up pair of dress loafers my father had thrown out, black socks pulled up to the knee, long shorts that looked like they had been cut from a pair of work pants by someone who hadn't quite gotten the hang of scissors, and a hat folded out of that

morning's *Chicago Sun-Times*. He had a sagging belly, and the beginning breasts that older men get, but he seldom wore a shirt. He was often burned red by the sun, and scratched his peeling skin, but never tired of the ability to walk around bare-chested. He always grabbed that day's paper off the kitchen table to fold his hat, and because he got up so much earlier than everyone else in the house he sometimes ended up wearing a section my mother had not yet managed to read. She would gulp her tea and glower out of the dining room window at him, as if she could pick out the headlines as he bent over his hoe.

On the other side of the picket fence was Mrs. Melmar's yard. Luscious Mrs. Melmar favored flowers. She had her own gardening ensemble: straw hat, large sunglasses, lime green shorts — a bit too tight, as my mother observed — a discarded pink oxford shirt of her husband's knotted up under her breasts, and sandals with daisies on them. She had fair skin, despite the amount of time she spent in the sun, and you could see the veins in her legs. She protected the red nails on her hands with huge yellow gloves. The skin of her belly was loose, from giving birth to her two kids, one college age, with a red MG I admired, and one just finishing up at St. Joseph's prep, but that made no difference to how wonderful I thought she was. Mr. Melmar worked long hours at a law firm downtown, and all I ever saw of him was the back of his head as he drove off in his Cadillac.

Vassily and his stupid newspaper hat seemed like an aesthetic affront, and I wanted to defend the innocent Mrs. Melmar from it, so, the first and only Christmas he was with us, I bought him a straw hat. It was not a great straw hat, I'll admit that, not a snappy Panama that you could roll up and stick into a cigar tube, but at least the damn thing wouldn't make him look like an idiot. He showed metallurgical teeth when he saw it. "I'll look a regular Tom Sawyer with this! Thank you, Andrewsha." Like all literate Russians, he had grown up with "Mark Tven." I'd seen the movie, thought the girl playing Becky Thatcher was kind of cute, but didn't really know much about him as an author, which distressed and irritated Vassily, as if, in turning my back on my great national literature, I had committed some kind of crime. He assumed that a boy my age would have read the complete works of Victor Hugo, Turgenev, and Conan Doyle as well. Such discoveries of my ignorance always sent him off on a tirade against the

painfully inadequate American educational system. "You will lose!" he would say, though how a knowledge of world literature was supposed to save us, he never said. "But you will not end up having to learn Russian. Oh, no. Our day is done. Prepare to speak Chinese!" Needling from me once revealed his complete ignorance of Chinese literature, and he sulkily retreated to his room.

I thought he had thrown the hat away, but once the ground thawed, he was out there, with it on his head. He looked like Jed Clampett painted by Camille Pissarro, but, still, I counted that as a small victory.

We ate a lot of cucumbers while Vassily lived with us. I tried to develop a taste for them, since they were a quintessential Russian vegetable, but never managed to do more than tolerate them. By the end of the summer, they rumbled into our kitchen like an avalanche. As it happened, though, the last ones were allowed to rot on the vines.

I SPRAWLED IN THE DARK living room, reading. Someone creaked past and I waited for Papa to tell me to go outside, it was such a nice day.

"The true history of that time will never be written." This was the first time Vassily had ever addressed me directly.

"It's not about the past," I said. "It's about the future."

He ran his thick finger on the cover. "But what is that?"

Against stereotype, no one in the house ever gave me a hard time for reading science fiction, or even remarked on it, although the ridiculous covers, with their screaming girls and junkyard robots, did sometimes made me feel self-conscious. But this one just showed a spacecraft on an airless planet, with a couple of guys in spacesuits climbing a slope toward the reader. It wasn't on the Moon, or at least not on ours, because you could see an alien planet with too many continents just at the horizon.

"It's a spaceship."

"Is an A-4," he said. "What Goebbels decided to call a V-2: the German vengeance rocket. I took one apart twenty-five years ago after we overran their testing field at Blizna, in Poland. We have better technology now."

No science fiction writer had ever imagined the complicated and hideously expensive way we finally made it into space. Even as Apollo



missions were climbing to the Moon, the spaceships in my books stayed sleek and unitary, things you powered up and flew off in.

To Vassily, science fiction was a way of reasonably thinking about the future and its possibilities, so he did not end up liking most of what I lent him to read, with its mental supermen, exotic planets, and entertaining aliens. It made no sense to him that their very impossibility was their pleasure. He puzzled over the spacecraft and their handwavium drives. "The thousand and one nights of Scheherazade, told by an engineering student who failed his graduation exams," was his literary judgment.

Two things Vassily liked about American life:

Saturday morning cartoons. Yogi Bear (I did actually hear him mutter "smarter than the average bear" to himself after fixing Mrs. Melmar's lawn mower), any superhero, though I think he favored Spiderman. He did not care for Jay Ward productions, the ones I loved, like *Rocky & Bullwinkle* or *George of the Jungle*, I suspect because he did not get most of the jokes. I was old enough to be embarrassed by some of the things he laughed uproariously at.

Breakfast cereal, the sweeter the better. Trix, Cocoa Puffs, Lucky Charms, Alpha Bits (which he claimed was "educational"). And he never finished a box, but left a tiny bit at the bottom, making me throw tantrums when only a crumbled handful of Cap'n Crunch tumbled out into my bowl in the morning. And he picked the marshmallows out of the Lucky Charms. I'm sure he did. More devious than you would expect of an adult, he would reach into the box and mine a vein deeper in the cereal, arranging it so that I was the one who would get a bowl of marshmallow-free cereal, then stare at me expressionlessly, daring me to complain.

Vassily was an excellent draftsman. While looking for work as a metallurgist, he earned money with technical illustration. He came into our house with two plant engineering textbúks, written by his friend Kolya Mishkin, for which he'd done the machine layout illustrations. One of them continued to be used as a textbook in Soviet engineering schools into the early 1960s, in an edition revised by others. Kolya Mishkin sometimes wrote Vassily long letters, which he stuffed into envelopes until they were close to exploding.

So I was used to seeing diagrams of milling machines lying out on his bureau. But once, on stiffer paper, there was a portrait of a woman. Vassily had used a piece of reddish chalk, so that it looked quite old. The woman had a Louise Brooks-style bob, and a direct, sad gaze. She looked intelligent, and a bit severe, like someone you would be uncomfortable with when you knew her, but whom you would think about later. A candle burned in front of it for a day, leaving a lot of wax that enraged my mother, and that I had to try to get off the oak top of the bureau. I looked at the picture while I did it. Vassily did not say who it was, and I did not ask.

One thing Vassily hated about American life:  
Wernher von Braun.

There are plenty of other things on the list, but none of them really says much about him. Von Braun though...I remember Vassily sitting in the living room, huddled like a sulking child, staring at a NASA press conference after Apollo 8 successfully orbited the Moon.

"Sturmbannführer von Braun," he muttered, using von Braun's SS rank: major. He affected to be flabbergasted by the fact that our space program was run by someone who had been both an aristocrat and a Nazi, but I don't think he was really surprised at all. He was just jealous. Years later, my mother revealed how many times Vassily had tried to get work at Huntsville. He blamed his failure on security problems, but it was really the less-than-cutting-edge nature of his metallurgy. A lifetime working with Soviet technology had left him permanently behind.

TV, newspapers, and magazines were dominated by the launching and orbiting of space vehicles in a way that makes no sense now. Those Mercurys, Geminis, and Apollos were celebrities, in a way their spacesuited occupants never quite became, despite the ticker tape parades and interviews in the magazines. It had been barely a decade since Sputnik had been launched, and now we were getting ready to land on another planet. Who knew where we would go beyond that? Vassily was always on the lookout for something that indicated laxness or poor metallurgy on the part of "Herr Sturmbannführer von Braun" and his team. He examined magazine photographs with a magnifying glass, but he never found a crooked weld or a bad alloy choice that he could be satisfactorily irritated by.

My issues of *Boys' Life* were filled with pictures of Moon bases, and stories about boys settling planets orbiting distant stars. I once calculated how old I would be at the turn of the new millennium, and discarded that age as scarcely credible, but knew that we'd be scanning asteroids for likely metals and eating in restaurants lit by the light of Saturn's rings, accompanied by large-breasted women in oddly cut but revealing outfits. The breasts are the one thing that actually came to pass. I've learned to live with that.

I scored a *Playboy* off my friend Paul, who had two older brothers. I read it cover to cover. Yes, I know that's a joke, but what I learned about hi-fis, driving sports cars at high speeds, and choosing shirts was almost as important as seeing naked breasts. So I was in despair when it vanished.

I had hidden it in what I thought was a perfect spot, above a heating duct in the basement, at the end opposite the washer and dryer. I had searched through the house for a long time, trying to figure out a place which could escape Mother's relentless cleaning and rearranging, and here, where there was a half-inch layer of old dust, seemed perfect. I even slid it a fair way in so that a casual glance from someone getting a light bulb off the top shelf opposite would not reveal it.

Then, one day, it was gone. I imagined a protective kitchen glove and a flipped-up garbage can lid as she disposed of the thing.

I walked past Vassily's room a few days later, and there he was, reading it. The cover was folded back, revealing an ad for a Teac reel-to-reel tape recorder, but I recognized it. He had his reading glasses on and was paying deep attention. He read something — a joke, a cartoon caption — lips moving, and frowned. He pulled the English-Russian volume of Smirnitsky's dictionary off the night table and looked up a word. Then he reread. He paused for a moment, blinked, then howled with laughter, teeth glinting.

Vassily was enormously and irritatingly facile at a whole range of small things.

He could tie any number of knots. He could tie knots to secure a load on top of our station wagon, or to tie up a package neatly, or attach a thin

line to a thicker so that it did not slip. He even indulged in decorative knots, though I learned about that only by accident.

I delivered some food to Mrs. Melmar from my mother. She was having a party, and my parents had been invited, but were unable to come. I didn't think they'd ever made it over to one of Mrs. Melmar's parties, but that was fine; Mr. Melmar never seemed to be able to attend either. My mother always sent food: casseroles, plates of cookies, Jell-O molds. When Mrs. Melmar answered the door, flushed from the shower, with her hair in a towel turban, I saw that her living room had been decorated with swags of dark-red velvet ribbons.

"Oh, it was Vassily," she explained. "He says it's a style that was used at the Imperial court. For those grand balls. Thank you so much, Drew, for this lovely..."

"Chicken Tetrizzini. But —"

"Thank your mother for me." Before I could decide whether to start with an explanation of Vassily's complete and total lack of connection with the Romanovs, or with the information that I was not called Drew, she had closed her door and disappeared.

My mother tallied everything, from dinner invitations to caramels in seemingly long-forgotten candy boxes, and so she also kept close track of dishes that ended up at Mrs. Melmar's. But the bowl that held the chicken reappeared in its proper cabinet just as Mother was on the phone telling a friend of our neighbor's lack of responsibility. Papa came into the living room holding it triumphantly, "See, it was here all along! You should go a little easier on her, her life's pretty difficult...."

As I only learned years later, sometimes fights aren't about the past, but about the future. The next time Mrs. Melmar had a party, Papa went, but did not bring a casserole. He took a bottle of vodka that, due to my depredations, was at least half water. I don't know what that many-times-reglued tax seal looked like in the light, but Papa seemed to enjoy the party anyway.

Some of the metals in Vassily's false teeth: gold, stainless steel, palladium, platinum, and zinc. He once said he could teach an introductory metallurgy class just by opening his mouth.

Vassily's friend Kolya, the one who had written the plant engineering textbooks, would sometimes visit Chicago. He worked for GE. The two of them would walk around the neighborhood, talking, and once spent a weekend in the Indiana Dunes together. The gangly and well-dressed Kolya had slid into American life in a way that Vassily had never managed. He had a Japanese wife and drove a late-model car.

It was after one such visit that the picture of the woman on Vassily's bureau disappeared.

**V**ASSILY HAD WORKED on the Soviet space program, and had, in fact, worked on the first Sputnik. He built a mockup of the satellite for testing separation from the spacecraft. His first model had been a cone, the initial design, but Korolev, the design bureau chief, wanted a sphere. It was an aesthetic decision, not an engineering one. He wanted a gleaming sphere, with the antennae thrown back as it galloped through the sky.

Vassily was reprimanded for his work, a humiliation he still felt over a decade later. Some of the welding on the test sphere was less than perfect. "But it is a test, Sergei Pavlovich," he said. "To test separation."

"This test sphere, all these things, they will be in museums!" Korolev shouted. "Do you want your grandchildren shaking their heads over your drunken welds?"

Vassily fixed it, and said that he was careful to be perfect from then on. He only defected after Korolev's death.

My friend Paul's older brother came through for me again: a six-pack of Pabst. I hid it in the shrubs by the garage. Paul and I had some elaborate plan — we were even going to see if Marilyn and Stacy from Paul's CCD class would join us. But that disappeared too, and the cans showed up, one by one, in Vassily's trash, which it was my responsibility to haul out.

Vassily had spent a few years in the gulag. I didn't think that was any excuse.

Vassily brought with him several pieces of a strong, light, silvery metal: part of a wing strut of a MiG-25, an open-ended wrench, and a cup, which he kept pencils in. He sharpened his pencils with a pen knife.

This was titanium. Everything's made of titanium now, from bicycles to eyeglasses, but then it was a mystery, and all sources of it lay within the Soviet empire. This metal was his negotiation point, and his knowledge of how to handle it almost got him down to Huntsville. Almost.

Would he have made it down there if he'd stuck around? My mother says no, and she's usually right. Still, I think about the former *zek* shaking hands with the former *Sturmbannführer* and getting down to the job of getting us into space. I don't know if that's a happier ending, given the way things have happened.

Using some rubber tubing, he turned the wing strut into a slingshot. He preferred ball bearings as projectiles.

"Ah, we would have dreamed of this. I would have ruled Sobornaya Street. We tore the trees in the city park apart, looking for strong forks. And the postman lost his tires once: a rubber inner tube made enough for a dozen. Acorns we had plenty."

Demonstrating the technique to me, he knocked a squirrel from its perch in a tree branch. I was near tears, looking at that elegant fluffed tail and the blood drops on its mouth.

Vassily was unmoved. "Squirrel. You like squirrels? They are cute on TV. Mice too. Children here like amusing vermin. Could not find a live squirrel in Kostroma, not even to eat. Cats either."

"You killed cats?"

He looked disgusted at my squeamishness. "They are much harder to kill. Don't worry about them. They yowl and run." He grabbed the dead squirrel by its tail and slung it into Mrs. Baumeister's battered garbage can. He stared at it judiciously. "Trash day is Tuesday. Air not too warm. Will not smell too bad." And he chuckled to himself.

And here I'd thought one of the characteristics of Russians was how much they loved animals.

He could also spit farther than anyone I'd ever seen, and he was disgusted that this was no longer a skill much valued. "In *Penrod*...ah, they are dead," he would mutter, for in addition to Twain, he seemed to have grown up reading a shadow version of American literature: Booth Tarkington, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, Carl Sandberg, James Fenimore Cooper.

He did not understand why there was a big shrine to a sport he knew nothing about in the hometown of Leatherstocking's creator. It seemed disrespectful.

And he was an excellent swimmer, with a loose-limbed form that got him through the water with a lot of splashing, though he did not wear bathing trunks, which he regarded as a bizarre affectation, and used a ragged pair of shorts, held up by a length of clothesline, that stayed wet and clammy for hours. He knew the constellations, which planet was up, and the species names of the trees on our street. I presume there is a detectable difference between a maple and an oak, but to this day I am not sure what it is. Taxonomy and classification are dead and dusty arts to me, but to Vassily they were vital parts of viewing the world.

But there were limits to his taxonomic abilities. The cliché about Russians loving mushrooms is absolutely true. On the cover of one of my Russian readers is a dirt road curving through a wheat field somewhere out in the great Russian plains, without a person or habitation to be seen. The very last double-page spread in the book shows edible mushrooms on one page, poisonous ones on the other, and a brief story about children having a contest collecting mushrooms in the woods. One brings back a full basket of toadstools and one brings back a bunch of beautiful red mushrooms with white spots: fly agaric, death caps. Aside from a scornful reprimand from Mom about their poor mushroom hunting skills, there is no panic or hysteria over death narrowly averted. The third brings back a handful of fine edible mushrooms. Quality, not quantity, is, I gather, the most unSoviet moral.

Vassily told a few stories about finding mushrooms with a fuel engineer in the woods outside Plesetsk, the space complex he worked at before moving to Kazakhstan. The stories were not interesting, but you could see that they brought back important memories.

One day he borrowed my mother's car, drove off to the woods, and came back with a full bucket of dirt-flecked fungi. We were alone in the house. My mother was visiting her sister in Ohio, and Papa was at some academic conference. The neighborhood was silent. Vassily fried the mushrooms in butter. I declined to join him.

He became desperately ill. "Evil twins," he gasped. "Here mushrooms have evil twins. No wonder Anglo-Saxons do not eat them. They fool you. This is a frightful continent."

Despite my irritation with him, I took care of him. He never apologized for having stolen my desperate attempts to enter the adult world, but he started telling me things that he had not before. At the time, I did not see that as evening anything out between us. But, still, I let him talk.

Commentators always called the Soviet cosmodrome "Baikonur," as TASS, the Soviet news agency, insisted. It drove Vassily crazy, since the launch site was really at Tyuratam, over a hundred miles away. He did not understand why our news media were so obedient.

He talked about how cold it was, and how hot. "At your Canaveral they sip colorful drinks on the beach with their toes in the warm water. That makes sense, ah? Americans know how to do it."

The Soviet engineers went between their barracks and the launch sites by a special train called a *motovoz*, made of wood, probably a lot like the train Vassily had ridden on the way to the camps. No toilets aboard. No water. Windows stuck shut or open. Once a blizzard came up as they were on their way home from work, and the train was stranded for two days. No one died, he said, and no wolves came. Just a bad commute.

The more he learned about the Saturn V, the more despairing he became. The first stage of the Saturn V came by barge from Louisiana, through a canal dug just to get it out of the facility to the Intracoastal Waterway. The second came from California through the Panama Canal. The third was flown from California in a Super Guppy airplane.

Soviet boosters had as many as thirty multiple engines. That had been a quick fix to getting sufficient power in the early days, but hamstrung their later development. The rockets were built in Kuibyshev, then taken apart, put on trains, and shipped to the cosmodrome. It had been Vassily's responsibility to get them all welded back together.

Two more things he loved:

Getting "free gifts." In his room he had three toasters, a waffle iron, and a never-functional pants presser he got for opening checking accounts, along with a yellow whistle shaped like a locomotive, a paperweight shaped like Mt. Vernon, and a Frisbee, all also with bank names on them: We would get multiple statements from accounts with minimum deposits for years afterward. He also had a gravy boat, a plate with the Maryland



state seal, two tumblers of different styles, and a teaspoon, from various gas stations and supermarkets. He kept them lined up on a shelf like trophies.

Archie comic books. He did not steal those from me, but bought them himself, and shared them. Actually, I swear he once bought a forty-five of "Sugar, Sugar" to play on a bulky mechanical record player he'd trash picked and repaired, but I could never actually find it in his room. I had heard that piece of classic bubblegum in there, somewhere between the Tchaikovsky and the Puccini, late at night, quietly, I was certain. I know he was fascinated by Veronica, but would grunt "the kind of person who caused the Revolution" if I wanted to talk about it. It seemed that the Veronicas of the world had a lot to answer for.

**V**ASSILY HAD DEFECTED wearing a pair of heavy black shoes with weirdly thick soles. Even for Soviet shoes, they seemed ridiculous. Once, he turned them over for me. Shining flecks of metal studded the shoes' soles. I touched them. They were tacky, like tar on a hot day.

He and some other metallurgists had been taken on a plant tour visit in West Germany. Some kind of *ostpolitik* thing. They weren't allowed contact with anything potentially useful to them, but Vassily had worked out a way to pick up alloy shavings without being obvious about it.

"They were all over the floor. Impossible to pick them all up with alienated proletarian labor. So they were available to us." I never knew whether the occasional appearance of Marxist-Leninist concepts in Vassily's speech was satirical, or whether a lifetime of political and linguistic indoctrination had actually had some effect.

Not enough, though. He faked food poisoning, ran off to the bathroom, and kept running, out a door and into a street where he was almost run over by a tiny BMW Isetta. He and the driver, a bank officer from Augsburg, exchanged Christmas cards for a while.

When Sputnik was launched, everyone involved, Vassily included, walked together, in silence, in front of the rocket carrier. It was two kilometers from the assembly-testing building to the pad. No one said a word. Most people only realized that they had been part of history

afterward, if at all. But they knew. It was not a Red Square parade, though that certainly came later. It was a real event.

Did Vassily really weep when he heard the first beeps from the satellite he had helped build? He never told me that he did. But the way he avoided saying anything about it made me think that he had.

I was responsible for mowing Mrs. Melmar's lawn. I did it gladly, though I always demanded a decent rate for it. I neglected the Toro, and it crapped out. I asked Vassily to help me fix it.

So I watched him do it.

"Von Braun wanted to go to the Moon, but found himself killing schoolchildren in London and Antwerp with rockets built by slaves kept in underground pens inside a mountain. Like Flash Gordon. Why read your books when we can achieve those horrors with such ease?" We watched reruns of *Flash Gordon* serials together, but I guess we were watching two different shows.

He ran his finger on the inside of a metal ring, frowning. "Pitted. No good." He flicked it off into a dark corner of the garage. I heard it tinkle and vanish beneath a stack of old tires — the remnants of a truly Soviet project of Vassily's that involved retreading them by hand ("the only way we kept our vehicles moving in Tyuratam!"). Even he had finally realized the incompatibility of this with American production capabilities, but the tires remained, to my mother's dismay. Papa collected so much crap of his own that the tires barely mattered.

"Korolev wanted to go to the Moon too, but found himself putting atomic bombs on top of rockets to destroy New York City. Even Sakharov loved his bomb. He wanted to understand the Sun, and he found a way to destroy cities with what he learned, working for men who would tear your fingernails out with pliers as easy as I talk to you now. Men he never would have broken bread with. But he let them stand over him in their blood-stained boots. Because they let him build and understand. Someone above knew us better than we knew ourselves."

He threaded a cotter pin through the hub, took the needlenosed pliers and bent it to hold. You could see the satisfaction he took in having just the right tool for the job, hanging right there in the tool rack, a tool rack my father never used.

"I am no different. I worked on missiles, as well as satellites and spacecraft. It was like anything else. Not defense of the motherland, or a desperate attempt to equalize power with the capitalist enemy. Just work, interesting work. Good work, what a man lives for. We sat in that miserable desert for years, testing. Not enough testing, for we were always in a hurry. You should static test all engines. Americans always do. They can afford it. We did not. Hurry, hurry. We had to meet our schedules, get the engines working, get them firing. Once we were testing an ICBM. The R-9. Oxidized with liquid oxygen. Made no sense for an ICBM. I can admit that now, but then we fought with the other design bureaus, some who were developing storable propellants. An ICBM needs to be launched quickly, and so needs a storable propellant. A space probe or manned flight, not so much. So, were we secretly working on what we really wanted to work on? An interplanetary spacecraft disguised as an ICBM? No. We were working on a weapon. It just wasn't a very good weapon. It does not excuse us.

"We were testing the first stage. We had built a test pad: a fixed part, and part that rotated on it. The missile was attached to the movable portion. We were ready to ignite, when I saw a cloud of mist at the pad. We were way behind schedule. Khrushchev himself, we were told, had an interest in this test. He needed to threaten the Americans with our might, and no one was to know that we had no missiles. Your John Kennedy complained about how many missiles the Russians had, and how badly the Americans had done under Eisenhower. Fantastic nonsense. I suppose we would have laughed if we had not been so busy trying to make sure he was right. He won his election, for all the good it did him. Is that democracy, that you get to choose your lies? We had to take the lies we were issued.

"Condensation meant a leak, which meant a delay in the test, which meant...we did not want to discover what it meant. I went out to the pad. It was a night test, no one was seeing me. It was a liquid oxygen leak, a small one. The repair would take at least a day, but...I unzipped, and I pissed on the leaky joint. It froze into ice and plugged the leak. It held until ignition, and the test went off well. That was how we did things at that time."

He took the lawnmower back. A short while later I heard it start up. The bastard. Did he think he could charm Mrs. Melmar by doing her lawn?

A few hours later he came back, as glum as when he went, and put the mower away without cleaning it off. And he'd left a few stray lines of grass uncut. I snuck over and trimmed them later, with hand shears. It's no wonder you don't see many Russians in lawn care.

Vassily avidly watched the Apollo coverage — with pleasure at the accomplishment, but with sadness too. Because he was watching for something else. Something that never came.

All that year, the Soviets were trying to launch the complex, thirty-engined N-1, which was to be their lunar launch vehicle. And, because of inadequate static testing, because of the fact that every piece of it was essentially a one-off, because they had to hurry, it kept blowing up only seconds after liftoff. No TV commentator ever mentioned what was going on at what they would have called Baikonur.

Vassily tried to convince himself that if only Korolev had lived, a Russian might still have ended up walking on a dusty surface not too different from the dusty steppes of central Kazakhstan, but I don't think he ever succeeded.

Years later, while traveling on business, I found Kolya Mishkin at his retirement home in Sarasota. A simple phone call, and he invited me over. His wife, Kumiko, somehow pegged me as Russian, and served me a variety of foods preserved by smoking, salting, and fermentation, along with vodka in ornate shot glasses. Kolya told me a few things about Vassily that I never learned while he lived with us. He and Vassily were no longer in touch. I could tell this hurt him.

Vassily had had a wife named Irina who was a physician in the Red Army and was taken prisoner by the Germans at Vyazma, in 1941, along with half a million of her comrades. She never came back. Presumably she died in one of those open-air cattle pens the Germans kept Soviet POWs in, regarding them as barely human. Kolya said she might well have come back, only to be rearrested by the NKVD, as all ex-POWs were, being of suspect loyalty, and shipped to a Soviet camp, to die there.

Vassily and Irina never had children.

Vassily was arrested in 1938 after other members of his aircraft design team, already in custody, cited his name as a saboteur. One of their test

aircraft had recently crashed on takeoff and damaged a wing. He was in the middle of dinner with Irina. They had been married for five months. They never saw each other again.

Vassily lost his teeth in the gold-mining camps of Kolyma. He'd had one of them, a molar, which he kept in a jar when he lived with us, along with a gallstone (not his, but not an interesting story either), a rubber lizard, and a valve from the fuel line of a German V-2 rocket he'd picked up at the testing site in Blizna, Poland.

He worked with three of the colleagues who had betrayed him in various space projects in the years after the war. One of them even ended up running a design bureau. Vassily never brought up what had happened, and neither did they. Two of them he liked and continued to drink with, and one of them, the bureau chief, he feuded with, but none of that had anything to do with 1938. It would have made no more sense for him to be angry or vengeful about that than it would have been to react to something they had done to him in a dream.

Kolya, Vassily, and Irina had all been school friends. After a few vodkas, Kolya revealed that he had once been interested in Irina as well. But he was assigned to the hydroelectric project at Bratsk before an understanding could be reached, and she married Vassily two days after her father, an officer, was arrested, in the Red Army purges that followed the execution of Field Marshal Tukhachevsky in 1937.

Every year, Kolya lit a candle on Irina's birthday, even though Russians only learned to care about birthdays after coming to America. I was able to tell him that, at least once, Vassily had done the same.

After a glance at his wife, who smiled permission, Kolya went into his study and returned with the woman's portrait Vassily had done. It was Irina. Vassily had had no photographs of her, and so had done it from memory. He'd given it to Kolya as a present during his visit. Kolya had tried to give it back, but Vassily refused, saying he could draw another one.

Neither Kolya nor I thought he'd ever drawn another one.

One day, near the end of the summer, Vassily disappeared.

So, to the wonder of the entire neighborhood, did Mrs. Melmar. Her youngest was now at Penn State, and it might have been that she now saw no reason to stick around.

The idea that they had disappeared together took a long time to be accepted.

My mother packed up a few things that Vassily had forgotten, but did not tell Papa what address she was sending them to. That led to the worst fight they had ever had. They got over that, but have never seemed as happy with each other since.

The next tenant was a sad man with a face like a frog who said he was writing a history of the twentieth century. I don't know if he ever finished it, but he lived there until long after I went to college. The room is now empty.

Vassily did not leave anything for me. Not a book, not a note, nothing. He just walked out and left, exactly as if I was a kid he really didn't have much interest in.

I think about Vassily every time our makeshift space shuttle blows up, killing a handful of astronauts, or, more optimistically, whenever an elegant space probe flies past the uncut diamond of a moon. He would have admired those smooth gadgets, so unmakeshift, so unmanned, so...unSoviet. The space shuttle, a thalidomide version of the proud spaceships that once flew in our imagination, is completely Soviet.

The Soviets themselves thought it even more Soviet than it actually was. When the thing was announced, they analyzed the costs. It made no sense. Any number of expendable launch vehicles would have been cheaper for the missions the thing could possibly perform. And Americans, after all, love to throw things away. What were they really up to?

Then they saw its trajectory: a military payload lofted into orbit from Vandenberg could reenter and hit central Russia in three and a half minutes. A Polaris missile launched from a boomer off Kamchatka in a first strike would take at least ten.

So that's how they managed to understand the shuttle: as a weapon. For once their economic analysis made perfect sense, but they still reached the wrong conclusion. They dropped the rest of their space program and developed their own shuttle, the *Buran*. It flew only once, then sat in a warehouse at Tyuratam until a fire destroyed it, along with whatever was left of the program Vassily gave so many years of his life to.

I see the shuttle has tile problems again. Every time someone drops a paperclip, it has tile problems. I'd love to talk that over with Vassily, but he can't possibly still be alive. ☞

*After spending 46/59ths of her life in Pennsylvania, Nancy Springer now lives in a hangar at a remarkably rural airfield a few miles south of Alabama, where she is learning a great deal about aircraft and alligators. Her daily life is in marked contrast to that of the protagonist of her current series, which is set in 1890s London and features Enola Holmes, daredevil embarrassment to her much older brother, the famous Sherlock. Her new story for us (her first in far too long) is a new look at a classic fairy tale.*

# Rumple What?

*By Nancy Springer*

**T**O TAKE FIRST THE POINT of view of the miller's daughter, her father is just the sort of consummate jackass who *would* brag to the king

that his girl can spin straw into gold. So when she is unceremoniously escorted to a shed full of straw, locked in there with a spinning wheel, and told to do her thing or die, she weeps — but not pathetically, as the tale would have it; rather, she howls with rage. No matter how dire her fear, no miller's daughter has ever been able to weep the dewy, snot-free tears of a damsel in distress; our wench bawls with messy, grimacing fury, all the more so because crying is *not* what she wants to do. It is one of the Seven Most Unfair Fates of the female condition that when you really want to thunder, threaten revenge, scare your asinine father and his new crony the king shitless, what happens? You goddamn cry.

Even so, when the shed door opens and the most peculiar little man comes in, she does not seize the opportunity to thump someone smaller than she, for quite sensibly she wonders what the hell is going on. The king locked the door himself. By what power did this dwarf, who is too short

to reach the handle, open it? And what does he want? The miller's daughter has heard some nasty rumors about what really went on with Snow White. Perversely, because there is now clear and present danger, her weeping ceases. Wiping her face and blowing her nose upon her apron, she tries to study the visitor, but through her traumatized eyes she can see only that he is sharp, all points, including his face. Pointy nose, steeple brows, wishbone chin, skinny birdy arms and fingers, chicken legs in velvet trousers tailored to fit. Peaked velvet cap, curling feather. Probably never went heigh-ho off to work in his life.

"What's the matter?" he wants to know. His voice is thin and pointy too, like a needle.

She replies very politely, in case he might be somebody, "Thank you for asking. It's my allergies. I'm horribly allergic to dusty places, straw, stables, that sort of thing." This happens to be true, making her whole rotten day even rottener.

"What will you give me if I spin the straw into gold for the king?" Of course he knows all about it; otherwise, why would he be there?

The miller's daughter offers, "Um, my necklace?" and is puzzled when he accepts that commonplace string of beads without further bargaining. As he spins all the straw, quite quickly, into gold, she feels relieved, naturally, that she need not die in the morning, but also apprehensive, for there's no getting around it: she's dealing with the supernatural, and has not yet paid a sufficient price. Even as she thanks the little man effusively for saving her butt, even as he takes his leave, she is hoping she will never see him again, yet has a miserable feeling that she will. These things happen in threes.

Bingo. She doesn't even get to go home for her second-best necklace before the greedy king, with the inevitable death threat, sticks her into another, bigger shed full of straw. At nightfall, sure enough, just like a mucus machine she starts weeping — this time with tears appropriately wretched, due to her allergies plus the fact that, while she does not miss her father, she does miss breakfast, lunch, and supper — and right on cue, the little man shows up.

She gives him her ring — again, the cheapest of baubles, yet once more he accepts without demur. Once more, not unkindly, he sets to work. He is an odd sort of midget, thinks the miller's daughter as she watches,



maybe not a dwarf after all, too slender, more like one of the pixies, but lacking their beauty, perhaps an elf...with a face like a wedge of cheese? No, he seems to fit no known category of little people, but it hardly matters, so long as he spins straw into gold.

Which he does. She is saved. But oh, no, day three, huge shed this time, huge pile of straw once more, death if she fails. Only this third time the king, that total oinker, adds that if he doesn't kill her, he will marry her, as if this were supposed to be an *inducement*?

So this time, when the little man shows up, the miller's daughter is weeping wearily, for no matter what happens, she's out of luck. When he asks what she'll give him to spin the straw into gold, she replies, "I have nothing left," which is, of course, not true. She could offer him the oldest of incentives, quite expects him to request same, and really doesn't care, although she supposes that, for the dubious sake of survival, she will —

So she is totally taken off guard when, instead of bargaining for the pleasures of her body, he says, "Oh, that's okay. Just promise me your firstborn child."

She is astonished; what on Earth does the little man want with a baby, all that noise and filth? But of course she agrees; who wouldn't? A firstborn child, which might or might not happen sometime down the road, is the merest abstraction when one is a teenager faced with death at sunrise.

To take now the little man's point of view: Eureka! The baby! This is the prize he has sought all along, caring nothing for the baubles, the necklace, the ring, and as for the girl herself — yes, indeed, she is quite appealing in her peasant-wench way, and he knows she is desperate enough to let him embrace her, but within his strong, solitary mind he also knows that such intimacy would provide only the most temporary of respite from his terrible loneliness.

For he is uniquely alone. It is one of the Seven Egregious Unfairnesses of his life that he is out of place even among supernatural manifestations. He is neither dwarf to delve in the Earth with other dwarves, nor pixie to dance in the moonlit mushroom-ring with other pixies, nor elf, sprite, fetch, bogy, nixie, leprechaun, brownie, or any sort of acceptable faery-goblin. And his is a situation most unjust, for, while giants sometimes live alone because of their grisly habits, and ogres because they are odious, the

singular little man has committed only kindness, namely, the spinning of straw into gold.

Yet he could save the miller's daughter's life a thousand times and she would still give him the same wary look, like a barn cat. Because she is an ordinary person, and he is not. In the minds of those who consider themselves normal, who *are* normal, otherness is suspect. Deformity (being auger-nosed, chicken-limbed, and only three feet tall) signifies evil. Doing impossible things means the devil's help, reason for fear.

But the baby will know none of this! Never will the baby look at him with misgiving; the baby will not only accept him, but love him! No baby can help but love, completely and helplessly and forever after, the one who nurtures it. And nurture it he will, as well as any mother; he will give it magical milk to drink, and what are a few soiled diapers to a being with the power to spin straw into gold? He will provide well for the child. And once he has possession of it, and especially once it grows a bit and can talk with him, he will be no longer a misfit, alone, but he will belong to a clan of two.

Now he must wait for the miller's daughter to give birth, that is all. And even if it takes a few years — which seems unlikely, given the buxom bloom of that girl — but even if she has the sagacity to delay the inevitable, the singular little man will pass the time in patience, as he has already passed many, many years, tens of hundreds of years.

To the king, who scarcely deserves a viewpoint, it's about time something went right. One of the Seven Most Unfair Grievances on his rather limited mind is that he had no choice what to do with his life, no options other than to be king after his old man croaked, yet he never got to be a Handsome Prince (he is an oinker in face as well as in heart) and therefore he never found a Beautiful Princess willing to be his bride. Or a Fair Lady. Or any female the least bit suitable to wed His Exalted Highness. Now he's a middle-aged Majesty with an ale belly, up to his triple chin in debt for doublets and hose and ermine codpieces and all the other ridiculous, expensive trappings of his regal job, and with vassals grumbling that he needs to provide an heir, and — and lo and behold, here the dumbass miller puts him onto a reasonably attractive girl who goes and makes him rich.

The king does not care about being loved. He does not feel alone in the world; there are plenty more like him, heading up nations and corporations. He considers that he can be very happy with gold to pay the bills, plus a wench with whom to rumple the bed sheets. Why not marry her? While she lacks the sort of pedigree that is usually required, she shows every promise of being quite fertile — almost certain to pop out an heir — and then there are the financial considerations. If he needs more money, he can always threaten again to kill her.

Not that he really thinks she has spun straw into gold. No, if he believed that, he wouldn't touch her; what if she could turn other things into something else? But the king doesn't worry, because he knows about the little man. He is no fool; he has his spies, his guards, his people keeping watch. He figures that whatever she — the miller's daughter, even though he is going to marry her, the king can't recall her name — whatever she gave the little man doesn't count because of the minuscule size involved, and absolutely can be overlooked in the light reflected from a pile of gold.

And if the little man comes back into the picture, well, it depends whether he, the king — who does not deserve a name either — whether he wants more gold at the time, or would rather take the freaky bastard, who has been described to him as twig thin and no more than three feet tall, and whack him in half with one blow of his sword.



**A**T FIRST the miller's daughter thought it would be fairly yucko, having to deal with His Ugliness, but she soon adapts. When he comes to her bed, she spreads her legs and thinks about necklaces made of real jewels, not beads. Thus, aside from her dealings with His Porcine Highness, being queen turns out to be a blast — getting to dress up, and spend money, and order people around, no more scrubbing and cooking and messy flour for her! Relief from hard manual labor is ample compensation for being married to the king, for the miller's daughter is no dreamer; she had never thought to find love. Least of all in wedlock, but not in any other way, either.

So it startles her to the heart of her heart, indeed it startles and astonishes her to discover such a heart within herself, when, most unexpectedly and all in a moment, she falls in love. Deeply. Irrevocably.

Completely. Under the most unexpected circumstances, when she has just gone through the most harrowing pain she has ever known.

When the midwife places the baby in her arms.

When she lays her face against the soft spot atop the baby's downy head.

One breath of that primal infant essence, and the queen is no longer the miller's daughter or the king's wife either; she is woman, and she is mother. She is weak and invincible and happier than a butterfly yet fiercer than a wolf, for she will defend this tiny person, this newfound love, with her life, against anything that threatens —

And then she remembers.

What she promised.

Oh. No.

No. Never. No matter what.

But — surely it won't come to that; surely the freaky little man didn't mean it, really. Or he has forgotten. She hasn't seen or heard of him for a couple of years.

Still, alarm bells of hell ring through her, agitation that will not cease for any soothing, so relentless that, within a day, she breaks down and asks to speak with His Royal Ego, her husband.

For the simple reason that the king gives not a rat's sphincter about the fate of the baby, one can tell that the newborn is a girl. One can assume this even though the child's gender is undocumented.

When his wife begs him for guards because someone is likely to take the baby, he laughs at her and asks who would want such a bawling parcel of stink. She does not know that he knows about the little man, and it costs her all the courage she never knew she had to tell him that she did not herself spin straw into gold. Will he kill her now? No; he laughs again, this time in quite an ugly way, because it has been necessary for her to admit that the little man spent three nights with her, and that she promised him her firstborn. He asks her what the gold-spinner wants with the baby. She whimpers that she does not know. Again she pleads with him to safeguard the child. "Why should I?" he demands, shouting with cancerous laughter. "It might not even be mine!" He says this not because he thinks it true, but simply because he

can. He says it to press his advantage, to consummate his power over her, to complete her despair.

Triumphant, exit the king.

When the little man opens the locked door to the queen's chamber and goes in, he is unprepared for the emotional maelstrom that greets him, for he had assessed the miller's daughter as the most pragmatic of peasants. Yet there she sits in the great canopied bed, hugging the infant to her velvet-robed bosom and weeping as he has never seen her weep before. And offering him all the riches she has, necklaces of emerald and ruby and diamond, rings of sapphire and gold, if he will only let her keep the child.

"But I care nothing for necklaces and rings," he says.

"You did before!"

"Only because the narrative demands a sequence of three."

"Let me give you my third child, then!" Fierce, desperate, this time she does not weep in a messy mucus-prone manner; today, hers are the tragic, crystalline tears of a true queen.

"But you promised me this baby," he insists, knowing that he is in the right, although her tears pierce his heart.

"Please!" She knows, also, that a queen must keep her promises. "Is there no power that can persuade you otherwise?"

"No power can prevent me except one: if you should guess my name."

His own compassionate honesty drags this truth out of him, for it is a very serious matter, the naming of names; as he is something more than a normal Tom, Dick, or Jane, anyone who knows his true name would possess power to command him. This is how wizards control genies and demons, by the naming of names.

The queen realizes what a chance he has offered her. "Grant me, then, three days —" It must, of course, be *three* days. "— to discover your name, I beg of you."

He can't believe what a doughnut he is being. Yet, "Very well," he replies, turning away.

"A hint! At least give me a hint!" The queen cries as the baby starts to whimper at her breast. "Is yours a short name or a long one?"

"Outlandish and multisyllabic. I will be back tomorrow to see how

you are doing." And off he goes, knowing himself to be a soft-hearted fool, and knowing just as well that she nevertheless considers him an imp of evil, and that he will be so depicted in human retellings of his story for the next millennium or two.



LONG WITH LOVE and womanhood, the baby has taught the queen the awesome power and significance of names, for she must name the child, and feels all the responsibility of the nomenclature not yet accomplished.

But far greater is the weight of divining the name that will save her baby — for so she perceives the matter; she cannot imagine what the bizarre little man could want with her child other than to eat it, perhaps, or sacrifice it in some fiendish rite, or starve it into a bony monster like himself, or whatever it is that fairies do with the babies they steal from cradles.

All day, hugging her child, she sets herself to thinking of names. That night she lies awake nursing the infant and trying to remember all the outlandish, multisyllabic names she has ever heard in her life. In the morning she summons the court scribe to begin a database — she herself can neither read nor write — and she sends out messengers to bring her more names, and more. But in the darkest hollow of her heart she knows that so many possible names are far beyond her ken; even a computer naming all the names of the deity would take a few minutes before the stars would begin to blink out.

When the little man whispers the name of the door and walks in, the queen is ready for him. She tries first some fairytale-type names she made up during the night. "Is your name Goldenhands? Is it Goldfingers? Goldspinner? Treasurewright?

"No, no, no, and no." Marveling anew at his own idiocy, the little man gives her another hint. "Your majesty, my name makes no sense."

"Moon Unit? Dweezil? Madonna? Rosencrantz, Guildenstern?"

"No, no, no, no, no."

And so it goes all that day and the next. Kasper, Melchior, Balthazar, Schwarzenegger, Engelbert, Humperdinck, ad infinitum and ad nauseum; wearisome to the max for all concerned, especially the little man. He

nearly decides not to show up for the third day, but he grits his pointed teeth and reports to the queen's chamber.

And he senses at once that, overnight, something has immensely changed. That royal woman, with babe in arms, welcomes him with dry eyes that emanate a strange gleam. "Rumplebedsheets," she greets him.

Oh, no. He begins to feel alarmed. "My dear little miller's daughter — " "It's Rumpel something. Rumpel-for-skin?"

"No." Then he repeats, shocked, "No!"

"Rumplestockings? Wait! Rumpel — Rumpel-shins-skin?"

"You are still trying to make sense out of me." When nothing makes sense. He feels his own eyes as sharp as knives begin to drip the clear blood that is tears, for he knows what she has done, like generations of mothers before her, for the sake of her child.

"Rumpel-stilts-skin!" she cries.

He feels weak, he feels her power over him, he has to sit down. "Almost," he admits. "Not quite. You're spelling it wrong."

"Spelling? I know nothing of spelling! But I know your name is Rumpelstiltskin!"

"In the original German," he hedges, "it is Rumpelstilzchen." And in the French Grigigredinmenufretin, in the Swedish Bulleribasius, the Finnish Tittelintuure and the Italian Praseidimio, and there are many more, in Estonian, Czechoslovakian, Hebrew, Japanese and so on, for like any self-respecting supernatural being, our oddling has many names, of which the miller's daughter knows only one.

"Rumpelstiltskin," she repeats in vast and bitter triumph, for it is just as the little man says in the story; the devil has told her. She has made a pact with the devil, bargaining away her soul to save her child, trading it for the knowledge of Rumpelstiltskin's name. So she belongs to the Prince of Darkness now. But her baby does not. Her baby, body and soul, belongs to no one but her.

Rumpelstiltskin has been defeated. But he does not, as the devil and the tale expect, stamp off in a suicidal rage. There is no longer any need for him to rip himself in half, as it has been proven that he is not an evil being.

He sighs in great, everlasting sadness and makes a strange request. "I would like to give the little one a name."

"What?" The mother is startled, for she had thought his interest in her baby was culinary. "How come?" For the first time she really looks at the little man. "What did you want with my child?"

Such is his weary sorrow that he does not even try to explain. Yet, now that she has shaken hands with Lucifer, she sees the light.

"Oh, for crying out loud," she whispers, "you wanted the exact same thing that I have."

Unspeakable, he stares back at her with spindle-sharp eyes.

"You get out of here," she orders. Recent events have made her a fitting mate for the king; they will be two of a kind from now on.

Her command lifts him to his feet, but before he departs he asks again, "Allow me to gift the little girl with a name."

And in her shameless greed the mother agrees to let him bless with the power of a faerie name the child he cannot possess.

He touches the babe's rose-petal cheek and names her, "Softasilkskin."

Then he goes away with his head hanging, his woodcock nose directed toward the ground, and is never heard from again.

But Softasilkskin, despite her deplorable parents and to the devil's disappointment, grows up to be the good and beautiful Princess Silkskin, meets a Handsome Prince and Lives Happily Ever After, even though everybody else in the story is royally screwed.



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# BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

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## CHARLES DE LINT

*The Sword-Edged Blonde*, by Alex Bledsoe, Nightshade, 2007, \$24.95.

**E**DDIE LaCrosse is a private eye of sorts. I don't mean he's treading Repairman Jack territory, living on the outside of present-day society, helping people out for remuneration; instead of F. Paul Wilson, think Glen Cook's "Garrett Files" series which are basically PI novels set in a fantasy secondary world.

But just because it's been done before doesn't mean it can't be done again. Look at how many mystery series there have been, and that are still ongoing. The trick to doing a hardboiled story well (beyond good characterization, plot, etc., etc.) is to have a strong, individual voice for your point-of-view character. We'll have seen a hundred variations on the plot before. What we want is that fresh view of the world from the character's viewpoint, and

a voice we want to keep listening to.

Alex Bledsoe does both with Eddie LaCrosse, and once you get past the novelty of a hardboiled fantasy novel, you'll forget that it's a novelty because there's meat on the bones of the story to be found here.

The book opens with LaCrosse being followed while starting a new case. When he finally manages to confront the man dogging his trail, the stranger turns out to be bringing him a message from the past, along with all the baggage that might entail. There was a reason LaCrosse left his homeland of Arentia all those years ago and never returned. Only one thing could bring him back, and the person who sent the stranger with this message is that one thing.

Naturally, things get messy, and eventually, LaCrosse has to confront his past, whether he wants to or not.

I liked this book for a lot of

reasons — some of which I've already mentioned above. LaCrosse is an interesting character with good PI traits: he's smart, a little bit of a wiseacre, stubborn, and has a code of ethics that he follows. I also like that this is mostly a gritty, on-the-streets sort of a book, even when scenes are set in a palace. And Bledsoe keeps his magics to a minimum. There's enough here to make the book a fantasy beyond its setting, but not so much that it's all smoke and fireworks.

In other words, it's real people with real problems that they have to solve the old-fashioned way. The magics are tools — like a modern PI's use of the Internet, say — not solutions.

Nightshade Books is an indie publisher, and I tend to think of them for story collections and risky books, but this novel is in a more commercial vein (like I would expect from the larger paperback houses) and I wonder if it marks a new direction for this publisher.

*Blood Bound*, by Patricia Briggs, Ace Fantasy, 2007, \$7.99.

"Alpha and Omega" by Patricia Briggs, in *On the Prowl*, Berkley, 2007, \$7.99.

I really liked Briggs's earlier book *Moon Called*. In this new one, her continuing character Mercedes "Mercy" Thompson says, "Sometimes I wish I was an average citizen...."

I'm glad she's not.

Instead, she's a confident, smart, shapeshifting coyote mechanic, who hangs out with werewolves, vampires, and other inhuman beings.

In the past decade or so there's been a virtual tsunami of books with vampire, werewolf and/or witch protagonists. They usually have a bit of a romantic slant (some edging into the erotic) and the protagonists are invariably solving crimes of some sort while coming to grips with being a vampire/werewolf/witch/inhuman, or dealing with a boyfriend or love interest that is so afflicted.

When I put it like that, I might sound a little condescending, but I don't mean to be. Because, like anything else, if it's done well, it'll keep our interest no matter what sub-genre, or even sub-sub-genre it happens to fall into.

And Briggs does it well.

Truth is, sometimes she seems to forget that she's writing fiction with a romantic slant, because she's so caught up in Story — and that's

the way it should be. Everything should come from the characters and their stories. If there's romance to complicate their lives, that can work just as well as a twisty plot turn, so long as we care about the characters, and stay caught up in how it will turn out.

In *Blood Bound*, Mercy gives a helping hand to a vampire friend named Stefan, but what starts out as her simply coming along to observe Stefan's passing along a warning to a visiting vampire soon spirals out of control, endangering Mercy and everyone around her.

Everybody who writes about supernatural creatures these days comes up with their own take on them — some variation to the accepted, traditional lore — and Briggs is no different. I love the politics of her supernatural beings, the pack mentality and pecking order of the werewolves, the ebb and flow of détente between the more powerful groups. Also, in her world, some of these beings have "come out" to the world at large, allowing her room to explore the social ramifications of the human world suddenly realizing that there are *others* among them.

And speaking of voices — as I was above in the Bledsoe review — Mercy's is that perfect likable,

charismatic viewpoint to draw us into her world.

*On the Prowl* is a collection of four novellas with no editor cited. I tried to read them all, but Briggs's "Alpha and Omega" is the only one that I finished. It features a bit player from the Mercy books, Charles Cornick — the son of the Marrok, which in Briggs's world is the werewolf boss of bosses — and a new werewolf named Anna. Charles is in town to investigate some discrepancies with how the local werewolf pack leaders are operating.

It's not a long story — only some seventy pages — but does a great job of capturing and keeping our interest while going a little deeper into pack mentality and exploring the wolfish concept of mating for life. And it also serves as our introduction to characters that will play out on a larger canvas in one of Briggs's upcoming books.

You might also like the other three novellas — the ones I can't comment on, because I didn't get very far into any of them — but for my money, the Briggs story is worth the price of admission all on its own.

*Harlan Ellison's Dream Corridor*, Dark Horse Books/Edgeworks Abbey, 2007, \$19.95.

*Shatterday*, by Harlan Ellison, Tachyon, 2007, \$14.95.

I hate to say this, because I write stories for a living, but what makes or breaks a comic book or graphic novel is the art, not the story. Sure, you need a story (and characters and all the other good writerly bits and pieces), but if you just wanted that, you wouldn't need to read a comic. There are prose books to fill the bill quite nicely.

One of my favorite things you can do with a comic, that you can't do in other two-dimensional narrative media, is tell two stories at the same time — one in the pictures, and one in the captions. Or you can just utilize that trick with two scenes unwinding at the same time in a longer piece, which can make for a nice punch in that part of the story. But I digress.

We were talking about art.

Now, what makes the artwork in a comic a dangerous enterprise is that art is so subjective. What one reader thinks is wonderful, another might hate, and vice versa. But more importantly to the medium, good art doesn't necessarily make for a good comic — just think of all the wonderful underground comics with their bad proportions and scratchy inking.

With good art, each panel might be fabulous on its own, but if it doesn't have a narrative flow, it's not working as a comic. It's just an illustrated story with a lot more illustrations than stories usually have.

This collection of comic book renditions of Ellison stories has a mix of all of the above, and a few that didn't appeal to me on any count. Yes, we have Neal Adams, Rags Morales, and Rafael Navarro, and a curiously fascinating piece by Gene Colan — that has his original pencils fronting the same page, only the second version is inked and colored — but a lot of the others just didn't work for me.

I know everybody loves Richard Corben's work, and I find it interesting panel-to-panel, but he's the stiffest storyteller around and I don't think I've ever fallen into the story when he's done the illustrations. I'm always aware that I'm reading. And while I like old-fashioned cartooning, Jay Lynch's work just sort of annoys me.

The thing is, to some degree, comics are like movies. When you get as visual a writer as Ellison can be, it's very difficult for an artist or filmmaker to match the movie we've already got playing in our head. Because of that — because I know how these scenes should play

out visually — this isn't my favorite collection of Ellison's work.

However, if you're jonsing for some Ellison, or just want to give his writing a try, I'd recommend you pick up the Tachyon reprint of *Shatterday* instead. It has a terrific Arthur Suydam cover and features a treasure trove of the author at his best: the title story, "Jefty Is Five," "Django," "All the Lies That Are My Life"....

The confrontational and shocking Ellison is always entertaining, but these stories open the reader up to the poet in the soul of this one-time "angry young man." They are never sentimental, but they resonate with heart and sentiment, and when you reread them as I just have, you'll remember again why Harlan Ellison is considered one of America's best short story writers. Or if you're new to his work, you might well discover a new favorite author.

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# MUSING ON BOOKS

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## MICHELLE WEST

*The Secret of Crickley Hall*, by James Herbert, Pan Macmillan, 2007, \$9.99.

*Ilario: The Lion's Eye: The First History Book One*, by Mary Gentle, 2007, Avon Eos, \$14.95.

*Ilario: The Stone Golem: The First History Book Two*, by Mary Gentle, Avon Eos, 2007, \$14.95.

*The Orphan's Tales: In the Cities of Coin and Spice*, by Catherynne M. Valente, 2007, Bantam Spectra, \$14.

I'VE SAID before in these pages that I'm not really a horror reader. I don't really love roller coasters and things that make me queasy, and I particularly dislike gore. This makes me not ideally suited to read a lot of horror novels. Let me make clear that I don't think they're bad, and I don't turn my nose up at them —

I'm just not part of the audience with which Horror in general finds itself at home.

But — you knew there was a "but" coming — I've always had a weakness for ghost stories. I'm not sure why; something about the attenuated cry of the long dead, something about the loss, and the possibility of justice, or at least the emergence of truth, strikes a chord in me. There's something ineluctably human about ghosts.

So I picked up the trade paperback of James Herbert's latest novel, *The Secret of Crickley Hall*, and the opening pages (well, beyond the prologue), drew me in.

Gabe and Eve Caleigh, along with their two daughters, have chosen to rent a large house in the small town of Hollow Bay, well away from their home in London. Gabe has a number of reasons for wanting to take a break from the city, but the most pressing, the most painful, are the memories it contains.

Almost one year ago, their son Cam went missing in a London park. Since then, Gabe and Eve have lived by the phone, waiting for word — from the police, from possible kidnappers, from anyone who might have seen their son. Their life has been put on hold — but they have two daughters, and children don't stand still; Gabe's aware that in some ways they've been absent from their home life since the moment Cam was discovered missing.

It's clear at the outset that the ghosts of Crickley Hall already pale in comparison to the things that haunt the Caleighs. Clear as well that until a body is discovered, hope is a brutality that endures, day in and day out, stretching and thinning but never quite breaking.

Even when faced with the evidence (ludicrous though it is to Gabe's mind) that supernatural forces do indeed exist at Crickley, that hope simmers. The locals are curious about Crickley, of course, and the information extant makes clear that, during a flood, several orphans, evacuated from London to the safety of Crickley, perished, as did the man who was in charge of the orphanage.

As the book unfolds, it becomes clear to Eve and Gabe (it's pretty clear to the reader from page one)

that the children's deaths were not due to drowning. The couple is aware that something isn't right — the doors that they lock open themselves during the night, water appears on the floor when there's no rain and no obvious signs of leaking pipes. Herbert contrasts the mundane with the mystical, pulling the threads together so that the reader, in the end, is aware of all aspects of the tragedy and the insanity that lead to the haunting of Crickley.

It's almost too much information; every single person except daughter Cally has a point of view — including the medium that Eve consults in desperation — and every single point of view serves to explain elements of the past that might not be clear otherwise, some of which might have been stronger for the murkiness; it's as if the plot and every single thing that could possibly be relevant to it had to be laid out explicitly for the reader.

But having said that, I read it through to the end, and the end was *perfect*. Enough so that I sat down and read it again.

For me, Herbert is at his strongest when dealing with the profound terror of the simply mundane, and one particular scene between Gabe and a London police officer is strong enough that you instinctively close

your eyes (which makes reading difficult) in order to give Gabe Caleigh a moment of privacy and respectful distance.

Mary Gentle's alternate history is interesting not because it's an alternate history of Carthage — although that aspect of the novel is certainly one of its strengths. No, it's interesting because, against the vast panorama of intricate daily detail, her unlikely protagonist, the Ilario of the title, stands out.

Ilario is a freak by birth and position — the King's freak, to be precise. What makes him a freak? He's a natural hermaphrodite. A freak is not generally considered worthy of assassination, and when Ilario is almost killed by the one woman in the world he loves and trusts, he flees the safety of his position, having earned his freedom — and the necessary papers that prove he isn't chattel.

Hermaphrodites are tricky; Ilario is a he because he thinks of himself that way, bodily truth notwithstanding; it's not with the women that he most strongly identifies — and in this, he's a product of his culture. Gentle's work, given her protagonist, can't help but examine gender, identity, and gender-issues, but the examination arises

out of the characters who are made, broken, or both, by their culture's expectations and limitations; there is one speech given toward the book's end, by Ilario's mother, Rosamunda, that is in equal parts ugly, true, and painful — and it never feels forced.

The first heady rush of freedom, mixed with Ilario's hopeful naiveté, conspire to rob him of said freedom; his ability to write secures him a place — as a slave — to *Rehkmire'*, an educated, well-traveled and somewhat inscrutable man. Because he is once again a slave, the second assassination attempt is treated as a crime against his owner, which complicates the political landscape. This, for Ilario, becomes obvious much later; he has a measure of safety with his new owner, and his new owner doesn't seem to want a servile, silent slave; he wants a companion.

Ilario's journey takes him to an artist, for whom he serves briefly as an apprentice; he falls in love, he travels to Egypt, and in doing all these things — and more — he learns the limits of his own compassion, and how to stretch them, making, in the end, friends of enemies. I want to say more, but I don't want to spoil the book in any way, so I'll limit myself to this: Gentle's



novel(s) cover a small span of time, but in that time, Gentle gives us the sense of a life, with all of its ironies, ugliness, and beauty, made slightly larger than life, but never larger than humanity.

This book reminded me of nothing so much as a Guy Gavriel Kay novel, and the unexpected ending was also perfect. I highly recommend it.

Cathrynne Valente's *The Orphan's Tales: In the Cities of Coin and Spice* concludes the two-book *The Orphan's Tales*. I found I had to reread the first book (*The Orphan's Tales: In the Night Garden*) in order to follow and appreciate the second fully, because the two books are halves of one long tapestry. You can make out the individual threads that comprise the almost-fairy tale stories, but if you pull them, you find that you unravel much more than a single knot.

We are returned to the Night Garden, and the strange orphan with ink upon her eyelids. We sit, as the young boy who has befriended her does, at her feet while she tells the tales that are written there — because the telling of each and every tale will possibly free her. Or perhaps that's how it began; it's become more, to both of the children,

who live in isolation in their own ways — she, in the garden, living on scraps and forage, and he, in the glittering palace, in the harem, surrounded by people who aren't really aware of who he is, but are aware of what he will become. He is the heir.

I loved the end — the very end — of the last book, because it took the evil sister stereotype, which had worked so well at the book's beginning (although it had frayed toward the end), and turned it on its ear with so few words. It was an act of generosity, both to the character and to the reader, because it was unlooked for.

In the second volume, in the world outside of the Night Garden, said sister, Dinarzad, is engaged to one of many suitors. She of course has no choice or say in her future husband, and she takes solace from her stolen hints of an orphan's tale. Not for Dinarzad the open and naïve befriending of a strange, fey girl, but in the life she's led, that's not a possibility.

But she's heard the stories that the girl tells the boy, and in her own way, she clings to them, and she offers what help she can, quietly and firmly.

The book is broken into two story cycles; in this it maintains the structure of the first novel. But

while the first deals with all manner of strangeness, wending its slow way to the birth of a child in an extremely unexpected place, the second shifts completely — because in the second half of the book, and in the last of the four cycles, the girl is no longer the sage and active teller of the tales her eyes horde — because the last of the tales are ones she could not read on her own eyes; the sentences break and cross over the lids, and she cannot, on her own, make sense of the narrative.

So the boy, her audience, becomes a participant in the last act in a much more obvious way: she asks him to tell *her* the stories, and while he's fretful and certain he will do a bad job, he does begin to read, and to offer to her what she herself can't see. As a metaphor about friendship and interdependence, it's brilliant.

And as the stories at last draw to a close, as the threads of the

whole are finally woven into whole cloth, the stories end, and the Orphan and her heir are left looking out at a world that we won't see — but can, thanks to Valente's work, imagine.

Valente's language is lovely, her imagery evocative, and she can make even the ugliest and strangest things seem briefly luminescent. But her fairy tales, while they have the cool precision of Angela Carter's, have as well some visceral blood and bone, some messiness that speaks of a reality that is not dissected and viewed through a microscope — and given the framing device and the structure of her story-within-a-story-within-a-story, this is impressive.

And yes, as in the first book, it's the unlooked for moments of kindness that almost break the heart. This is not, in any sense of the word, a traditional narrative structure...but I loved it.



*A historian by trade, Albert Cowdrey often writes stories with some historical perspective to them — readers might, for instance, recall his story “The Revivalist” from our March 2006 issue. His new story is a dark tale of life in the Deep South during the Nineteenth Century. Life was anything but easy in those days....*

# The Overseer

*By Albert E. Cowdrey*

**T**HOUGH APPROPRIATELY  
rundown, Nicholas Lerner's big house  
on Exposition Boulevard in uptown  
New Orleans was not haunted. The

same could not be said of its owner.

That spring morning in 1903 the old man was getting ready for the day. Or rather, Morse was making him ready.

"So, Mr. Nick," murmured the valet, applying shaving soap to his employer's face with an ivory-handled brush, "are you writing a book?"

*Damn him, thought Lerner. He knows I detest conversation with a razor at my throat.*

"My memoirs," he muttered. "A few jottings only. Waiting to die is such a bore, I write to pass the time."

Was that the real reason he'd become a late-blooming scribbler — mere boredom? Most of his life had been devoted to hiding the truth, not revealing it. And yet now....

"I think you must be writing secrets," smiled Morse, piloting the blade beneath his left ear. "The way you lock your papers in the safe at night."

"I lock them up," Lerner snapped, getting soap in his mouth, "because they are *private*."

And had better remain so, he thought wryly. The other memorabilia in his small safe — an ancient, rusted Colt revolver; a bill from a Natchez midwife; a forty-year-old spelling book; a faded telegram saying RELIABLE MAN WILL MEET YOU RR LANDING STOP — would mean nothing to any living person.

Then why should he write the story out, give evidence against himself? It seemed to make no sense. And yet, having started, somehow he couldn't stop.

Humming an old ballad called "Among My Souvenirs," he pondered the problem but reached no conclusion. He closed his eyes and dozed, only to wake suddenly when Morse asked, "Who is Monsieur Felix?"

Lerner heard his own voice quaver as he replied, "Someone I...knew, long ago. Where did you hear of him?"

"Last night, after you took your medicine, you spoke his name over and over in your sleep."

"Then I must have seen him in a dream."

Shrewd comment. Morse knew that the opium he obtained for the old man caused intense dreams, and would ask no more questions.

Without further comment he burnished his employer's face with a hot towel, combed his hair, and neatly pinned up his empty left sleeve. He removed the sheet that protected Lerner's costly, old-fashioned Prince Albert suit from spatter, and bore all the shaving gear through the door to the adjoining den and out into the hall. Remotely, Lerner heard Morse's voice — now raised imperiously — issuing orders to the housemaid and the cook.

*Good boy!* thought Lerner, checking his image in a long, dusky pier glass. *Make 'em jump!*

He was rubbing his smooth upper lip to make sure no bristles had been left, when suddenly he leaned forward, staring. Then, with startling energy, his one big hand whirled his chair around.

Of course nobody was standing behind him. A trick of his old eyes and the brown shadows of his bed chamber with its single door, its barred and ever-darkened window. Or maybe a result of talking about Monsieur Felix, whom he would always associate with mirrors, fog,

winter darkness, summertime mirages — with anything, bright or dark, that deceived the eye.

"Ah, you devil," he muttered, "I'll exorcise you with my pen. Then burn both you and the damned manuscript!"

Maybe that was the point of his scribbling — to rid himself of the creature once and for all. Smiling grimly, he trundled into his den.

Like its owner, his safe was an antique, the combination lock encircled with worn red letters instead of numbers. He dialed a five-letter word — *perdu*, meaning lost, a word with many meanings as applied to its contents. He jerked open the heavy door, drew out a pack of cream-laid writing paper and carried it to his old writing desk, a burled walnut monster honeycombed with secret compartments.

On the wall above, his dead wife smiled from a pastel portrait. Elmira as she'd been when young — conventionally pretty, not knowing yet that her short life would be devoted mainly to bearing stillborn children. On her lap she held their first boy, the only one born alive, but who, less than a month after the artist finished the picture, had suffocated in his crib, in the mysterious way of small children.

Bereft, surrounded by servants who did everything for her, idle, dissatisfied, Elmira had died a little too. Her husband had granted her everything she wanted except entry into his head and heart.

"Why don't you trust me?" she'd asked him a thousand times, and he'd always answered, "My dear, I trust you as I do no other human being."

She'd never quite found the handle of that reply. Morse's father and mother would have understood the irony — the fact that he really trusted no one — but of course they were dead too.

*They saw into my soul, Lerner thought, but it didn't save them, either one.*

He shrugged, dismissing Elmira and all the other ghosts. Time to introduce the Overseer into his story. But first he wanted to sharpen his unreliable memory by rereading what he'd written so far. He drew the papers closer to his nose and flicked on a new lamp with a glaring Edison bulb that had recently replaced the old, dim, comfortable gaslight. Squinting balefully at his own spidery, old-fashioned handwriting, he began to read.

## CHAPTER THE FIRST

### *Wherein I Gain, Then Lose, My Personal Eden*

*As I look back upon the scenes of a stormy life, filled with strange adventures and haunted by a stranger spirit, I am astonished to reflect how humble, peaceable and commonplace were my origins.*

*My ancestors were poor German peasants, who in 1720 fled the incessant wars of Europe and found refuge on Louisiana's Côte des Allemands, or German coast, near the village of Nouvelle Orléans. Their descendants migrated northward to the Red River country, still farming the land but, like the good Americans they had become, acquiring slaves to assist their labors.*

*Here in 1843 I was born into the lost world that people of our new-minted Twentieth Century call the Old South. The term annoys me, for to us who lived then 'twas neither old nor new, but simply the world — our world. I first saw light on a plantation called Mon Repos, a few miles from the village of Red River Landing, and there spent my boyhood with Papa and Cousin Rose. Our servants were three adult slaves and a son born to one of them, whom Papa had named Royal, according to the crude humor of those times, which delighted in giving pompous names to Negroes.*

*Our lives resembled not at all the silly phantasies I read nowadays of opulent masters and smiling servants. Our plantation was but a large ramshackle farm, its only adornment a long alley of noble oaks that Papa had saved when felling the forest. Our lives were simple and hard; many a day at planting or harvest-time Papa worked in the fields beside the hands, his sweat like theirs running down and moistening the earth.*

*In our house Cousin Rose counted for little, for she was but a poor relation whose parents had died in the same outbreak of Yellow-Jack that claimed my mother. Ever pale and fragile as a porcelain cup, she spent most days in her bedroom, more like a ghost than a girl. The slave boy Royal, on the other hand, counted for much — at least in my life.*

*How I envied him! He never had to study, and went barefoot nine months of the year. I was beaten often by the schoolmaster, but Royal escaped with a scolding even when he was caught stealing flowers from the garden, or roaming the house above stairs, where only the family and*

the housemaid were allowed to go. Indeed, Papa so favored him that I came to understand (though nothing was ever said) that he was my half-brother.

Spirits, too, inhabited our little world. All who dwelt in that benighted region believed in divining rods and seer stones, in ghosts and curses, in prophetick dreams, buried treasure, and magical cures. Royal and I were credulous boys, like those Mark Twain so well describes in *Tom Sawyer*, and we met often in the bushes near the servants' graveyard at midnight to whisper home-made incantations, half fearing and half hoping to raise a "sperrit" that might shew us the way to an hoard of gold — though none ever appeared.

In these expeditions Royal was always bolder than I, as he was also in our daylight adventures. He dove from higher branches of the oak overleaning our swimming-hole than I dared to; he was a better shot than I, often bearing the long-rifle when, as older boys, we fire-hunted for deer. Ah, even now I can see and smell those autumn nights! The flickering of the fire-pan; the frosty crimson and gold leaves crackling under our feet; the sudden green shine of a deer's eyes, the loud shot, the sharp sulphurous smell of burnt powder, and the dogs leaping into the darkness to bring down the wounded animal!

*Are we not all killers at heart! Scenes of death having about them a kind of ecstasy, however we deny it, greater even than the scenes of love.*

Preceded by a clink of china, Morse spun the door handle and backed into the den, hefting a tray with a dish under a silver cover, a folded napkin, and a goblet of red wine.

"When," demanded Lerner testily, "will you learn to knock, my boy?"

"Mr. Nick, I ain't got enough hands to carry the tray, open the door and knock, too."

A doubtful excuse, thought Lerner; a table stood in the hallway convenient to the door, where Morse could have rested the tray. Frowning, he turned his pages face down on the desk.

Morse set his lunch on a side table, moved the wheelchair, shook out the stiff linen napkin and tied it around Lerner's neck.

"Should I cut the meat for you, Mr. Nick?"

"Yes, yes. Then leave me alone. And don't come back until I ring."

"You'll be wanting your medicine at the usual time?"

"Yes, yes. But wait for my ring."

In leaving, Morse took a long look at the half-open safe, a fact that did not escape the old man. Lerner ate lunch slowly, pondering. His dependence on Morse reminded him all too clearly of how his father had become the servant of his own servant after Monsieur Felix entered Mon Repos. That had been the beginning of many things, all of them bad.

*I will not suffer that to happen again,* he thought.

Lerner had an old man's appetite, ravenous at the beginning but quickly appeased. Without finishing his lunch, he hastily swallowed the wine at a gulp, wheeled back to his desk, took up his manuscript and again began to read.

*The Eden of my childhood did not last long. In the Fifties the world's demand for cotton soared, and Papa began to dream of growing rich.*

*He was not alone. The steamboats that huffed and puffed up and down the Mississippi began delivering carved furniture, pier-glasses, and Paris fashions to our community of backwoodsmen. Ladies — it seemed overnight — graduated from sun-bonnets to hoopskirts, and the men were as bad or worse, with their sudden need for blooded horses and silk cravats and silver-mounted pistols and long Cuban segars.*

*In this flush atmosphere, Papa borrowed from the banks and cotton factors and bought new acres, though land had become very dear. He made trips to New Orleans to barter for workers in the slave markets at Maspero's Exchange and the St. Charles Hotel, and he rebuilt our comfortable log house as a mansion with six white columns, which — like our prosperity — were hollow and meant only for shew. But he remained a farmer, not a businessman; he overspent for everything, and could not make the new hands work, for he was too soft to wield the whip as a slave-driver must. Soon he was in debt and facing ruin, and so in 1855, during one of his trips to the city, he hired an Overseer to do the driving for him.*

*'Tis hard for me to remember Felix Marron as a man of flesh. I see him in my mind's eye as the sort of shadow that looms up in a morning fog, briefly takes human form, then fades again into a luminous dazzle.*



Yet when first we met, he seemed merely freakish. Royal and I were returning from a fishing jaunt when we espied him talking to Papa, and we stared and giggled like the bumpkins we were. I suppose he was then about forty, but seemed ageless, as if he never had been born — a strange creature, very tall and sinewy, his long bony face a kind of living Mardi Gras mask with grotesquely prominent nose and chin. Though 'twas August, he wore an old musty black suit, and I remember that despite the stifling Delta heat, his gray face shewed not a drop of sweat.

When Papa introduced us, he ignored Royal but swept off his stovepipe hat to me, loosing a cloud of scent from his pomade, and in a penetrating stage whisper exclaimed, "Bonjour, bonjour, 'ow be you, young sir!" Shifting an old carpetbag to his left hand, he clasped my right in his cool bony grip, causing a braided whip he carried over that arm to swing and dance. Then Papa led him away to view the quarters, and Royal and I laughed out loud — thereby proving that neither of us was gifted with prophecy.

Papa hired Monsieur Felix (as he preferred to be called) upon the understanding that he would have a free hand to extract profit from our people and our acres. At first the bargain seemed to be a good one, for the Overseer was restless and tireless, keeping on the move (as the slaves said) from can't-see in the morning to can't-see at dusk. He had a strange way of walking, lunging ahead with long silent strides that ate up the ground, and appearing suddenly and without warning where he was not expected. And woe to any slave he found idling! Not one escaped flogging under his regime, not even Royal, whose days of idleness and indulgence came to an abrupt end. Soon he learned to dread the hoarse whisper, "Aha, tu p'tit diable," the Overseer's sole warning before the lash fell.

At first Papa resisted this abuse of his darker son. But the Overseer argued that to favor one slave was to corrupt all by setting them a bad example; further, that Royal (then twelve years of age) was no longer a child, and must be broken in to the duties of his station in life. Finally, that unless he could impose discipline on all our hands, Monsieur Felix would leave Papa's employ, and seek a position on a plantation that was properly run. So Papa yielded, and by so doing began to lose mastery over his own house.

I watched Royal's first beating with fascination and horror. My own

floggings at the schoolmaster's hands were but the gentle flutter of a palmetto fan compared to the savage blows administered by Monsieur Felix. Had I been the victim, I would have raised the whole country with my howls; but Royal remained obstinately silent, which the Overseer rightly saw as a kind of resistance, and added six more to the six blows first proposed, and then six again, leaving Royal scarce able to walk for three or four days.

Thus began several years of tyranny. Even when he grew older and stronger, Royal could not strike back — for a slave to assault a white man, whatever the provocation, meant death — nor could he flee, for the patterollers (as we called the cruel men of the slave patrols) scoured the neighborhood. And so he bore his whippings as the others did, and let his hatred grow. In my innocence I loathed the Overseer, for I was too young to understand that he flogged our people not out of cruelty, nor indeed of any feeling at all, but as an herdsman prods his ox or a plowman lashes his mule — to wring work from them, and wealth from his acres.

In that he succeeded. With the crops heavy — with the hands hard at work — with prices rising, and dollars rolling in, Papa felt himself no longer the descendent of Westphalian peasants, but rather a great planter and a member of the ruling class. He bought leather-bound books by the linear foot, and installed them in his den, though he did not attempt to read them; he drank from crystal goblets, though his tippie was corn whiskey drawn from his own still. He paid Monsieur Felix well, and built him a substantial house midway between Mon Repos and the slave quarters, which was where the Overseer himself stood, in the southern scheme of things. Papa thought he would be content to live there and receive wages that grew from year to year, and mayhap marry in time some poor-white slattern of the neighborhood. But in this he misjudged the Overseer's ambition.

Applying still more pomade to his lank black hair, he took to invading our house, supposedly to talk business with Papa, but in reality to ogle my cousin Rose — then fifteen and almost of marriageable age. Though I was but a great clumsy overgrown boy with long skinny shanks and feet like keelboats, I well understood that the Overseer designed to marry into our family as the first step toward gaining control of Mon Repos. In a rage, I summoned up my smattering of French and called him

cochon to his face, for his English was so poor I feared he might misunderstand if I called him swine. I ordered him never again to set foot in the house, at which he laughed in his strange soundless way. He would have loved to give me a taste of his whip, but the caste system protected me, for only the schoolmaster was allowed to beat the heir of Mon Repos.

To get rid of me, Monsieur Felix told Papa I deserved to finish my education in the North, saying how 'twould honor our family if I won a degree from a famous school. With money weighing down his pockets, Papa agreed, and in the summer of 1860 I was compelled to say goodbye to everyone and everything I knew, and set out for the land of the Puritans, as I imagined it. I wished to take Royal to Yale College as my valet, but Monsieur Felix warned Papa that he would run away, once in the free states. So he was doomed to stay behind, whilst I boarded a Cincinnati-bound steamer at Red River Landing for the first leg of my journey.

I was seventeen years of age, as fresh and proud as a new ear of corn, and as green. Wearing varnished boots and carrying my shiny first top hat, I stood upon the hurricane deck, gazing down at ragged and dusty Royal, who had come with the family to say farewell. We who had been playmates now were clearly master and slave. Yet we shared a secret plan, devised during many a night-time meeting at the graveyard. If, as I anticipated, Monsieur Felix laid hands upon Rose, Royal was to kill him, and give himself up to the sheriff without resistance. I would return post-haste and testify that he had merely obeyed my orders, as a slave should, to protect my cousin's honor. As his reward, when I inherited him I would set him free. Upon this understanding, I left my rifle in a place only Royal knew — wrapped in oily rags, and tied atop a rafter in the cabin of the slave quarters where he slept.

I raised my hand to him as one conspirator to another, and he nodded in reply, his face smooth and immobile as a mask of bronze. Rose wept, Papa honked into his handkerchief, and Monsieur Felix vouchsafed a thin arid smile, like an arroyo dividing his blade of a nose from his large blue chin. Then the whistle blew, the bell chimed, the gangplank lifted, and the muddy bank — like my youth — began drifting away from me.

Siesta time had come. Lerner returned the manuscript to the safe, closed the heavy door and spun the dial. He picked up a little silver bell,

rang it briskly, and within ten minutes Morse appeared like a household genie. He removed the lunchtime clutter, spread and adjusted the old man's lap robe, put a pillow behind his head, and vanished again, quietly closing the door.

Since the back injury that had left him unable to walk, Lerner had needed such coddling to shield him against severe pains that otherwise spread up and down his spine. Yet he understood that his immobility was killing him. He could almost feel the systems of his body rusting in place, shutting down slowly. *How tiresome it is*, he thought, *to die by inches*, and with an effort of will concentrated his mind upon his story. He'd come to the end of what he'd already written; tomorrow he must carry the tale forward, weaving fragments of memory into a narrative.

He dozed until five-thirty, waking when Morse turned on the electric chandelier and set down his dinner tray with a folded evening newspaper beside the plate. Lerner ate while perusing the unexciting developments of the day — the end of the Philippine Insurrection, the galumphing of that damned cowboy in the White House. Then the long ritual of putting him to bed began. Morse worked with the deft expertness of a hospital nurse, and by seven-thirty the old man was resting in bed, propped up on a hillock of cushions and covered with spotless linen. He sniffed the penetrating, somehow frigid smell of grain spirits left by the alcohol rub Morse had given him, then folded his hands and smiled, awaiting the high point of his day.

"Come, come, Morse," he whispered.

The indefatigable one returned with a gleaming salver on which rested a sticky pellet of opium wrapped in rice paper, a crystal flask of amber bourbon, a shot glass, and a silver coffee spoon. Deftly he prepared the laudanum, dissolving the opium in the whiskey with ritualized movements, like a priest mixing water and wine.

"I need to go and buy more of your medicine, Mr. Nick," he murmured, presenting the drink.

"Why not buy it from a drugstore?" Lerner demanded. "Those neighborhoods by the docks are dangerous."

"Mr. Nick, I can do that, but it'll cost twice as much. The import tax alone is six dollars a pound, and I can buy decent opium from a Chinaman for five."

Grumbling, the old man extracted a few bills from a drawer in his

marble-topped night table and handed them over. Then in three long sips he drank the draught that ended pain and summoned sleep.

His throat burned, he felt a sharp pain in his gut, then a banked fire that burned low, warming and soothing him. A delicious languor began to spread through his old body. He felt his weight lessen, then almost evaporate. He felt dry and light, like a balsa-wood doll floating high on still water.

"Ah," he whispered. "So good, so good."

Morse lingered, watching him, rearranging his bedclothes to make him even more comfortable and secure. When he felt sure that Lerner was asleep, he leaned close to his ear and whispered, "Father? I need to know the word that opens the safe. Tell me the word, Father. Father? What word opens the safe?"

Lerner grunted but slept on.

"Shit," grumbled Morse. "Old bastard, he don't relax even when he's snoring. I bet he keeps a bag of gold in that iron box of his."

From the cache of bills in the night table he took a tenner, added it to the five, thrust both into his pocket, and soon afterward left the house. He slipped away into the lengthening blue shadows, his mind perhaps on pleasure, or merely on escaping for a few hours the dull round of servitude to a dying man that defined his daytime life.

Lerner woke early, tasting ashes. Dun shadows filled the bedroom, but a thin white scar of daylight already ran between the red-plush window drapes, casting the shadows of iron security bars. He seized the silver bell and rang it loudly.

"Morse — " he began as the door opened. But instead of Morse, the yellow face of the housemaid — Cleo, was that her name? — intruded, anxious beneath a spotted kerchief.

"Oh, Mr. Nick," she burst out, "don't nobody know where Mr. Morse is at. I been up to his room to look, and his baid ain't been slep' in."

Lerner stared at her. If she'd told him the sun had failed to rise in the east, he could hardly have been more astonished.

With Cleo's help he wrestled himself painfully into the wheelchair, but there his abilities ended. A one-armed man with a spinal injury was close to helpless. A manservant had to be borrowed from next door to

prepare him for the day. Lerner found the process distasteful; he hated to have a stranger see him unclothed or touch him; the fact that the man obviously disliked the work made it no easier to bear. In shaving him, the fellow nicked his face repeatedly, until Lerner sent him away with a miserly tip and a muttered curse. A barber had to be brought from a nearby shop, and he charged a whole dollar for the visit!

By then Cleo had brought him breakfast, and it was all wrong for a variety of reasons. Yet he failed to complain about the chilly toast, hard egg, and unsugared coffee. As he entered the den a good hour late and dragged out his manuscript, he was worrying over something much more serious: the possibility that Morse might *never* return.

As he'd warned last night, rough characters swarmed on the docks; the knife, the revolver, and the slung-shot were common weapons of choice; the Mississippi with its murky water, vast size, and hidden undertows was perfect for disposing of superfluous bodies — as Lerner knew well from certain experiences of his own.

"And without Morse, how would I *live*?" Lerner demanded aloud, and there was nobody to answer him.

From a desk drawer he took out a new gold-banded reservoir pen, uncapped it with fingers and teeth, filled it from his inkwell by pressing down an ivory piston, and tried to fix his mind on his story. From time to time as he wrote, he raised his head and listened. Despite the thick walls of the house, some street sounds intruded — the horn of a motor-car brayed; a seller of vegetables chanted "Ah got ni-ess al-li-gay-tuh pay-uhs" — and the house itself was never totally quiet, doors opening and closing for no good reason, a woman's starched dress (Cleo's?) rustling past in the hall.

And yet, despite his distraction, the new chapter began taking form. His thoughts might be elsewhere, but his hand traveled over the paper in a sort of automatic writing, like a spirit's message upon a sealed slate.

## CHAPTER THE SECOND

### *Wherein I Encounter War, and a Spirit*

*Need I say that eighteen-sixty was a poor year for a southern lad to get an education? That winter a storm of rebellion swept the cotton states, and in the spring of '61 the country went to war.*

*For a time I dawdled, hoping that peace might break out. But after the affray at Fort Sumter, with the whole country responding to the call of the trumpet and the drum, I saw that I must go home. I took a train to Cincinnati, where the steam-packets were still running, war or no war; and after a week spent churning down the Ohio to the Mississippi, and down the Mississippi to the Red, stepped ashore at the same spot I had left a year earlier.*

*Already the Landing seemed to belong to another and darker age. The village was strangely silent; I learned that my schoolfellows had vanished into the Army, and two were already dead of camp diseases in Virginia. Mon Repos had never deserved its name less. Though I arrived at noon, I found Papa already drunk, and noted with disgust how he wobbled when he walked, like a goose hit with a rock. Royal and the Overseer both had disappeared, and when I asked Papa what had happened to them, he only mumbled and shook his head.*

*'Twas Rose — all atremble — who told me the story. Monsieur Felix had proposed marriage to her, and, when she declined, threatened to compromise her honor so that she would have to marry him, willing or not. This she took to be a threat of rape, and many a tear-stained letter had she written, praying me to return and save her. But because of the war, I received none of them. Then the war itself intervened. The men of the slave patrols joined the army and went east, and as soon as they were gone, Royal took down my rifle from its hiding place, shot Monsieur Felix neatly through the eye and ran away, leaving the corpse lying spread out like a hog ready for flaying on the gallery of the nice house Papa had built for him.*

*At first I felt only pleasure in hearing this tale, and laughed gaily at the thought of being (as I imagined) rid of the Overseer forever. But after I spent a day tramping over our acres, I began to suspect that in reality his death had ruined us all. The crops of corn and cotton stood heavy but weed-choked and in need of hoeing; the hands idled about the quarters, and when I ordered them to work they went but slowly, with deep mutterings that boded no good.*

*Brooding over these developments, I turned my steps homeward, passing close by the Overseer's house on the way. I found it a scene of ruin, grown up with vines like a castle in a fairy tale, with cicadas droning*

in the trees and hot sunlight vibrating upon a weedy mound of earth where he lay buried. A pine board carved only with his name and the date of his death served as his headstone.

I was gazing upon this melancholy scene when something moved upon the vine-shrouded gallery of the house. I shaded my eyes against the fierce light, and espied through drifting red spots Monsieur Felix standing in the spot where he had died. His pale face seemed to float amid a dark wreath of cat's-claw, his left eye nothing but an oozing pit, his right gleaming like a splinter of glass. His blue jaw moved and his penetrating whisper etched itself upon my eardrums, saying, *Tu, mon p'tit, serais mon vengeur.*

I stepped back — stumbled over the grave marker — staggered, blinked away drops of stinging sweat, and an instant later found myself entering our house, with no sense of time elapsed nor memory of anything I might have seen along the way. Rose was fetching something for Papa, and she stopped and gazed at me, astonished. She brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes and said, "Nick, are you well?"

I answered without knowing what I said.

That night I drank with Papa, paying no attention as his slurring voice complained endlessly of his troubles, but instead thinking of the words of the Phantasm. I could make no sense of them: for what could be greater nonsense than that I (of all people) should become the avenger of my hated enemy, Monsieur Felix?

I went to bed more than half drunk, and slept like the water-logged trees that river pilots call dead-men. When I wakened at first light, the house seemed uncommonly silent. For half an hour I lay at ease, waiting for the usual noises to begin, the murmur of voices, the rattle of pots in the kitchen, the creak of the pump handle. A summer wind passed across the world with a great sigh, and a light rain began to fall. Still I heard nothing from downstairs, as if the house had died overnight. Then my door opened and Rose slipped in, looking especially thin and pale in her cotton nightdress.

"Nick," she whispered, "where are all the servants?"

I jumped out of bed, threw on some clothes and ran outside. The brief shower having passed, I walked through the slave quarters, finding the cabins all empty, with doors hanging open on leathern hinges, and in the



*little fireplaces ashes that were still warm. The paddocks were empty, the farm animals all gone, driven into the woods and marshes by the departing slaves. I understood then that the slaves felt no loyalty toward Papa, who had never protected them from Monsieur Felix, whilst the Overseer's death had freed them from the fear that alone had made Mon Repos run.*

*I stood gazing at the overgrown fields, where little pines had already begun to spring up, whilst afar off, a church bell started to toll in dreary monotone — the notice of a funeral, whose I don't know: perhaps the funeral of our world.*

So much Lerner had written, and was staring at an unappetizing lunch that Cleo had brought, when the door to his den opened suddenly and Morse stumbled in.

His hands were tremulous, his face yellow, his shoes muddy, his clothes mussed and odorous. In a hoarse voice he began to complain about the darkness of the house. In fact, it was no darker than usual; but as Lerner perceived, the pupils of his eyes had shrunk to pin-points that shut out the light.

If anybody knew opium's aftermath, that man was Lerner. Speaking firmly, he ordered Morse to go to bed and, when he sobered up, to return and explain his conduct. He slouched away, looking like some wretched Lascar who sleeps off his drug debauch under the wharves, while the old man, muttering a curse, returned grimly to telling his tale.

*Well do I remember those late-summer days in '61 when, like a child, I imagined that the worst had already happened.*

*I knew that we must abandon Mon Repos, hoping to return in better days, should better days ever come. And yet for weeks Papa refused even to consider flight. Finally, in a rage I threatened to take Rose away with me, and leave him to manage alone. At last he yielded and we became refugees, an early rivulet of the great tide that would flow southward in years to come.*

*At Red River Landing we bought our way aboard a fishing yawl, for Papa had become very close with a dollar, and refused to buy us passage on a steamboat.*

Mostly our fellow-passengers were ordinary country folk, but one caught my eye — a very tall, thin man dressed in black, who sat at the prow, stiff and unmoving like the dragon's-head of a Viking ship. 'Twas evening, and he was hard to focus on against the blaze of the setting sun. I looked away, blinked and looked back: a hefty woman was seating herself in a flurry of skirts; perhaps he was behind her, perhaps not. Intending to make sure whether he was what I feared, I rose to my feet. But the boat was now so crowded and the freeboard so small that the captain shouted at me to sit, or I should swamp her.

Night shut down, the sails were raised, and we began a ghostly voyage down a moon-haunted river, in company perhaps with a Phantom. Does this not sound like a poem by Coleridge, or a tale by Poe? Yet I remember chiefly the discomfort of the wretched craft. I dozed and waked a dozen times; a woman nursed a baby that cried often; some fellow who had managed to fall asleep snorted like a donkey-engine. Once a steamboat blazing with lights pounded by in midstream, and the waves so rocked our burdened craft that we shipped water, and had to bail with cupped hands.

Come morning, we landed at New Orleans, all of us stiff and soaked and blear-eyed. The levee swarmed with shouting laborers; barrels and bales and cannons and gun-carriages were heaped up everywhere, guarded by new-minted soldiers in fancy uniforms. I sought the man in black, but he seemed to have vanished in the confusion. We engaged a porter with a barrow, and traipsed behind him through the Old Quarter, which was saturated with the smell of roasting coffee and noisy as a parrot cage.

In time we reached a house on Rue des Bons Enfants, or Goodchildren Street, belonging to some of our cousins, and they bade us welcome, having plenty of room to spare. Their warmth was not entirely a matter of family feeling. We again had money, for the city banks were still open, and Papa insisted on paying all our expenses — as foolish in generosity as he had been in miserliness. From the same sense of pride, when I was commissioned a lieutenant in the Confederate Army, he bought me a fine gray uniform that did not survive my first and only battle.

That fall and winter of '61 I divided my time between Goodchildren Street and a training camp amongst the farmlands of Metairie, where I drilled men who knew as much about marching as I did, which was

nothing. Passing through town one evening, I fell captive to the charms of a fair privateer, and caught the clap. 'Twas a light case that I got over in a week, but it occasioned much merriment in camp, where my fellow officers pounded me on the back and chortled, "Now Nick, when you have killed your first Yankee, you will be a real man at last!"

Whilst I was yet ill and feverish, I again saw the Phantom. Three or four nights in succession he rose in my dreams, fixing his one eye horribly upon me. One bright winter day I saw him gazing at me from the shade of an oak-grove hung with streamers of gray moss. Though daunted by the sight, I hastened toward him, but found nothing there. The figure had been only a compound of light and shadow—or at any rate, so I explained it to myself. Then I grew well again, and dismissed the Phantom as the trick of a sickly mind.

In plain fact I had no time for ghosts. The war was speeding up; we began to break camp and load our equipment. A thrill of excitement touched with fear ran through every man of us, for we knew that the day was nearing when at last we would see the Elephant, meaning combat. The order came in the first days of April, 1862, when the fields were covered with white and red clover. My company boarded a train to Jackson, and marched into Tennessee, where twenty-four thousand men were soon to be laid low in the great battle at Shiloh Church.

On the first day of the fight, I led a scouting party that blundered into an enemy picket. The Yankee sentry (a boy whose white, scared face will forever remain in my memory) instantly threw down his musket and fled; the weapon was on half-cock and discharged by itself, the ball smashing my elbow. Whilst the battle raged, the surgeons chloroformed me and cut off all but about eight inches of my left arm. I was laid in a wagon amongst other mutilated bodies and hauled away to the rail-head, screaming at every lurch and bounce.

So began and ended my acquaintanceship with war: but not with the Spectre, who soon seized upon my state of weakness to manifest himself again.

By the time I reached New Orleans, the stump of my arm had become infected (or mortified, as we said then), smelling foully and oozing unpleasant matter. Nursed by Rose, I lived through feverish days and haunted nights. Again Monsieur Felix ruled the dark hours, smiling

horridly from amid great fields of corpses, where not one was whole — some torsos without arms or legs, some bodies without heads, some heads without bodies that glared from white eyes the size of walnuts.

Then my mind cleared, and I became able to understand the scarcely less frightening news that Rose brought me. I heard of the federal fleet appearing off the Passes, and of hard fighting at the downriver forts; of warships riding high on the flood-swollen Mississippi, with guns pointing down at the city's rooftops; of rioting mobs on the levee, burning warehouses and looting banks; of blue-backs filing ashore and deploying a battery of bronze cannon in front of the plush St. Charles Hotel, where Papa used to stay when he was bargaining for slaves.

At home on Goodchildren Street our cousins began to cast bitter looks upon us. Papa had run out of cash, and because the war had severed the connection between city and farm, food had become very dear and hard to come by. Our hosts begrudged us every mouthful we ate, as if we were taking it directly off their plates — as in fact we were. Indeed, we were no longer a promising or even a respectable crew. Papa was customarily drunk, and even when sober, more scatter-brained than ever; Rose was obliged to work as a house servant, but a frail one who never did anything right. As for me, the cousins thought that if I recovered, 'twould be only as a poor cripple who would continue to eat but bring in nothing.

So they moved me out of my comfortable bed-chamber, and put me upstairs in a store-room that held a clutter of retired furniture, broken crockery, and dusky mirrors. 'Twas stifling hot under the eaves, and no place for an injured man; but they thought it good enough for me, hoping perhaps that I might die and relieve them of a burden.

One summer morning I woke from a restless sleep. The arm I had lost was aching as no arm of flesh and blood could, every hair upon it like a burning wire. And yet, as the bright hot morning light grew, my eyes shewed me nothing, not even a ghost, lying on the ragged counterpane beside me. Rose slept nearby on a battered chaise, with a fine dew of perspiration upon her pale face, and though the pain of my phantom arm was such that I wished to moan or cry out, I remained silent for fear of waking her.

Restlessly my eyes wandered to an old dim mirror with an irregular

dark shadow in the middle of the glass. As I gazed, the shadow began to take shape, like the sort of black paper silhouette that in those days decorated every parlor in the land. 'Twas Monsieur Felix — no, I could not have been mistaken! No man save he ever had such a face. As I watched in fascination, he began to turn slowly toward me, his features emerging like the image on a tintype in its acid bath, until his full face hovered in the glass, picked out in shades of glistening black and bone white.

Unable to bear the empty socket and gleaming eye fixed upon me, I stumbled from bed, my limbs rubbery as those of a new-whelped pup, and in one fierce motion turned the mirror and slammed it against the plaster. The glass shattered and Rose started up and cried out, "Oh Nick, you should be resting, not walking!"

"So should he who roused me," I answered, and her eyes widened in fear, for she thought that suffering had caused me to go mad.

The first sign that the household on Exposition Boulevard was wobbling back toward normal came when supper appeared at the proper hour.

Cleo carried the tray instead of Morse, but the meal was tasty and hot, with terrapin stew, warm bread, and a glass of elderly pale sherry. Lerner dumped half the sherry into the stew, swallowed the rest, and made a better meal than he'd expected.

After dinner Morse appeared, clean and silent, and went to work at the most intimate duties of a body-servant: setting Lerner upon the com-mode-chair, giving him an alcohol rub, putting his nightshirt on him and settling him in bed. Watching Morse prepare the laudanum, the old man found himself admiring the performance. Instead of making weak apologies, Morse was seeking to demonstrate how much Lerner needed him — and in that he succeeded, the clever fellow.

After drinking the potion, Lerner ordered him to sit down on the foot of the bed, and said quietly: "You know, my boy, this drug should be taken only to subdue pain and give rest, not for a doubtful pleasure that ends in a horrid slavery."

"I'm in pain all the time, Mr. Nick," he muttered, looking at the floor. "This stuff gives you ease, so I thought it might do the like for me."

"You're in pain? Are you ill, Morse?"

"No. Yes. My anger eats at me."

"Anger at what?" asked Lerner in surprise, for he'd always thought Morse very comfortably off, for a colored man.

"At *this*," he said, holding up his left hand with the dark back turned toward Lerner, then turning it over to show the white palm. "Wondering why I could not be like *this*. I have long known you are my father. If I were white, you would have loved and acknowledged me, and I would be a man among men."

For a moment Lerner was too astonished to speak. Unsteadily he asked, "Who told you that I am your father?"

"My mother."

It was on the tip of Lerner's tongue to say, *But you never knew your mother*. Instead he bit his tongue and said slowly, weighing the words, "I'm glad you've spoken out, my boy. Trust me, and I shall yet do you justice."

He sent Morse away, all his secrets intact. But when he was alone, lying in the dark on clean linen, Lerner found sleep difficult to come by. Maybe the laudanum was losing its effect. Or maybe he was finding it hard to grasp the fact that a Morse existed of whom he knew nothing.

What did the fellow do when he wasn't being the perfect servant? Did he read books? Practice voodoo? Engage in orgies with Cleo and the cook, improbable as that seemed? And how could he dare to live some other life, when he depended on Lerner for food, shelter, pocket money, everything? Wasn't that a kind of treason?

In time Lerner fell asleep, the puzzles of reality yielding to gorgeous visions of things that never had existed at all. And as he snored, the next day's installment of his memoir composed itself, someplace deep beneath the level of his dreaming.

### CHAPTER THE THIRD

#### *Wherein the Demon Saves and Enslaves Me*

*On that day, the day I saw him in the mirror, I dressed and went forth with sleeve pinned up, in search of work.*

*I found none. The city had always lived by grace of the river, but now 'twas blocked by warring armies. Everything had ground to a halt; the*

once-busy levee lay empty, save for a few Union warships and a graveyard of decaying hulks, and no work was to be had by anyone, much less a cripple.

After a week of useless tramping about, I turned the mirror in my garret around, for desperation had conquered fear, and I was ready to receive counsel from whatever source. Alas, the shattered glass shewed only fragments of my own gaunt and yellowed image, which I thought grimly appropriate. Gazing at that shattered countenance, I brought to mind a verse or incantation that Royal and I used to chant in the graveyard at midnight: Come ye, take me, lead me on/ Shew me gold, and then begone! Very deliberately, I said it seven times, which was the magic number: but answer there was none.

Yet that very afternoon, I saw — upon Levee Street, about half a square distant, amid waves of heat rising from the cobblestones — a thin, black-dressed figure loping with unmistakable gait through the trembling mirages. And as the strings of an harp will pick up and faintly repeat distant sounds, although no fingers have touched them, my heart-strings thrilled to a sense of hope and fear.

I hastened after him; he turned the corner of Gallatin Street, as did I a moment later: he had vanished, but in his place an amazing sight met my eyes. A file of colored men wearing blue uniforms were practicing the manual of arms. Royal was drilling them, and his strong nature had already asserted itself, for he wore upon each sleeve three broad gold stripes in the shape of spear-heads pointing down.

When the "Stand at ease" was given, I approached and spoke to him. He threw back his head, and laughed so loud that his men stared. We shook hands and spoke briefly of old times; he queried me about my missing arm, and briefly told me how he had enlisted in one of the new colored regiments. I admitted to needing food, whilst he revealed an ambition to sign the name he had chosen for himself — Royal Sargent — to the muster-roll, in place of an X. We struck a bargain: he promised to get me army rations, if in return I would make him literate.

That same evening he came to the house on Goodchildren Street, but was not invited in. The cousins pointed out that teaching him to read and write was forbidden under the state's Code Noir; the fact that the black code was already dead they ignored, having no patience with mere

reality. So Royal and I sat down on an iron bench in the patio, and for the first of many times bent our heads over a reading-book that some charitable society at the North had sent his regiment. When he went, he left behind army bacon and coffee and hardtack and cornmeal, which the cousins did not disdain to share that night at supper-time.

When not working, he and I chatted about the past. I asked him how he felt after killing Monsieur Felix, and he answered solemnly, "I took my first breath when he took his last."

Hesitantly I asked if he thought the Overseer's spirit might walk, as those who die by violence are said to do. Royal laughed his loud laugh and said, "So many have died in the war, he'd be lost in the crowd!"

He inquired after Rose, and began to bring her small gifts, oranges and fruit pies and ices that he bought from the sutlers out of his pay of ten dollars a month. She received his gifts in the kitchen, the only room the cousins permitted him to enter. They stood by and glowered as she thanked him, saying how she rejoiced to see him a free man — at which they glowered more.

In this manner we all lived for a time, but had barely grown accustomed to regular eating, when without warning Royal's unit was sent down-river to garrison the forts at the Head of Passes. Then in quick succession fell two more blows: Papa died from a lethal mixture of whiskey and despair; and our cousins, in an excess of Confederate feeling, refused to take the oath of allegiance as ordered by the commanding general. Straightway they were branded Enemies of the United States and expelled from the city; soldiers seized their house as rebel property, and sold it at auction with all its contents.

Rose and I swore allegiance to the old flag, but it did us no good; we were driven into the street anyway, and a most difficult time began.

Ah, how fortunate are those who have never learned the awful truth taught by hunger: that a man will do anything, to live one single day more!

I tried hauling rubbish, but 'twas a two-handed job; I did poorly at it, and was laid off. I was for a time doorman of a brothel frequented by Union officers. One of them, a Major Wharton, was sufficiently moved by the plight of a Yale man to recommend me to a sutler, who sold food



openly and bad whiskey secretly to the troops. I began keeping his account books, whilst Rose plied a needle twelve hours a day, repairing blue uniforms in a sweat-shop run by the Quartermaster.

Yet for all our efforts, we existed rather than lived in three poor rooms near the levee, beset with bugs of many species, but all equally blood-thirsty. I sought everywhere for my private Spectre, but found him not; at times my bizarre longing to behold again such an one as he made me wonder whether madness might soon compound my other troubles. And then, one night in January, 1863 — I remember the rapid, mushy impacts of sleet against the shutters — I heard a shot in the street outside, and feet scampering away.

I tumbled out of bed, lit a stump of candle and hastened to the room's one window. A fat civilian in flash attire (probably a gambler) lay on the paving-stones amongst glistening pebbles of ice. Superimposed upon this image, I saw my own reflection in the dirty window-pane, and something else besides — a tall, thin, black-dressed man standing just behind me.

I whirled around, almost dropping the candle, and of course no one was there. But as I stood trembling, suddenly my confusion vanished and I knew what I must do. I blew out the candle, ran outside in my nightshirt, bent over the dying man and began rifling his pockets. My fingers slipped into something that felt like warm wet liver — 'twas his wound — then closed upon his fat leather purse. Back inside, I hid the money (good greenbacks, near an hundred dollars!) in a knot-hole in the floor, and moved my bedstead to cover the hiding place.

I washed my bloody hand and went back to bed. Sounds came and went outside — a mounted patrol clip-clopping past halted, there was talk, and later a wagon clattered up to remove the body. Meantime I lay in bed, scratching my bug-bites, and resolved that henceforth I should take what I needed from the world by force. And though I had been law-abiding all my life, I knew exactly how to go about it.

Next day I used twenty dollars of the gambler's money to acquire an army Colt revolver (the famous model 1860) in the thieves' market that flourished in the alleyways near the Hospital Street wharf. I taught myself to load the weapon one-handed, clamping the grip under my stump, and using my right hand to tamp in powder and balls and affix copper caps to the nibs. That same night I ventured into the narrow fog-bound

streets to try my luck. Guided by the glow of wide-spaced lanterns, listening always for the tramp of the provost marshal's guard and the clatter and jingle of the mounted patrols, I robbed two drunks. Though neither yielded as rich a haul as the gambler, I garnered enough to hand Rose money that would see us through a few more days.

"Where did this come from, Nick?" she asked, and I answered, "I prayed to Saint Dismas," meaning the patron saint of thieves.

Night after night I worked to perfect my technique. My method was to come up behind my victims and strike them down, using the heavy pistol as a club; then clamp it under my stump and search their pockets. 'Twas not an easy life, for others of my own kind were in the streets; we snarled at each other like dogs eyeing the same scrap, and twice I had to drive off my fellow jackals with bullets.

Yet these scavengers also became my new acquaintances. I met them in the cheap brothels I began to patronize, and the wretched saloons called doggeries, where I warmed my belly against the night air with dime shots of bad whiskey. From the garish crowd of whores, pimps and rogues who shared my perils and my pleasures, I learned that I was a knuck or a sandbagger when I struck my victims down; that when I searched their pockets I was overhauling them; that my pistol was a barking iron; that when I tracked my prey in silence I was padding my hooves. Yale had taught me none of these things.

There was also a Creole argot, of which I understood a few words: the women called me *bras-coupé*, after a famous one-armed bandit of an hundred years before, or *bête-marron*, meaning a tame beast gone wild. I was struck by that term, because it reminded me that the Overseer's half-forgotten surname had also been Marron — as if we had been brothers.

And brothers we might have been, brothers in crime. I saw his shadow often in the streets, slipping past a lantern, or sliding along a wall half lit by a red-shaded coal-oil lamp in the window of a bagnio. I recognized him easily by his strange walk; I envied him his silence of movement, and soon learned to take him as my guide. He was clever at finding the staggering sots who remained my favorite prey, and the shadow of his long arm pointed them out to me. He also led me out of danger. One night, when the cavalry were so close behind me that I saw the sparks their horseshoes struck from the cobblestones, I spotted that

angular dark form vanishing into an alleyway, followed it and found safety there.

Later — in that deceptive hour just before dawn, when the eyes cannot tell a cloud from a mountain — I saw him again, dimly through a bank of silver mist. With the mad aim of thanking him for my salvation, I shouted, "Monsieur Felix!" and sprang after him. The shadow turned, and like a razor seen edge-on, instantly disappeared. And later that day I started up in bed, awakened by my own screaming.

Those who never have been haunted can scarcely believe the power of a Phantasm. Soon even the full blaze of noon could not drive him off. Upon a crowded street my eye would fall upon my shadow against a wall, yet 'twas not my shadow but his; and if the shadow raised its arm, I would find my own rising too, as if he mocked me, saying by a gesture: You see which of us is real, after all!

In my dreams he appeared in many forms: as himself, stalking about in his old black suit, the whip over his arm; as the host of a costume ball, where at midnight the dancers all dropped their masks, revealing the faces of wolves, foxes and rats; as an idol carved of wood, to which dim crowds were bowing, myself among them. Awakening sweat-soaked from such visions, I began to comprehend that the Overseer was no mere ghost — no mere echo or reflected image of one who had lived. By giving himself up wholly to the insatiable passion of revenge, Monsieur Felix had become something stranger than that, more powerful and more utterly lost. And it was to this demonic power that I bowed down, for I needed to draw upon it to save myself.

One night in such a dream the idol's stiff jaw moved, and the well-known voice whispered, Tu, mon p'tit, serais le roi du coton! At which, upon waking, I could not but laugh. For how should a one-armed knuck become King of Cotton? And yet that very day upon the street a Yankee officer with eagles on his shoulder-straps and a great clanking saber banging at his knees, called out to me, "Old Eli!"

'Twas my benefactor Wharton, now promoted to colonel. He asked if, as a onetime planter, I knew quality in cotton, and when I said yes, he intimated that a friend of his wanted to deal in Confederate cotton smuggled across the lines.

So I acquired a new profession, more rewarding than the old, though not less dangerous. Using my knowledge and my weapon and the woodcraft I had learned as a boy, I guided the dealer — a gross creature named Klegg, with especially foul breath — into the rebel-held regions beyond Lake Pontchartrain. There he bought cotton very cheap, intending (as he told me) to transport it to the city, ship it out and sell it very dear at the North, where the factories were starving for the stuff.

My spectral ally guided us well. Twice I saw him standing stiff as a scare-crow in an overgrown field, pointing a long finger in the direction we must take. Returning from our jaunt, I was poling our heavily laden bateau along the sedgy margins of Lake Maurepas, when I saw him again, this time a deeper shadow in the blue dusk, pointing directly at Klegg, who was seated in the bow with his fat back turned to me. Taking the hint, I silently laid down the pole, drew the Colt from the waist-band of my trowsers, and shot the dealer between the shoulder-blades.

This was my first murder, and as the reeking powder-smoke dispersed I was all a-tremble, gazing at the deep round oozing hole in the man's spine, scarce able to believe what I had done. But then I felt a great surge of power, as if now I could do anything. With some effort, I heaved the carcass into a slough, watched a drowsy alligator wake long enough to play sexton, and then, taking up the pole again, went my silent way.

After selling the cotton, I sought out Colonel Wharton, reported the dealer killed by bandits, and bribed him to select me as manager of a west-bank plantation the government had seized from its rebel owner. With free Negroes as workers and government mules to pull the plows, I was soon making cotton for thirty cents a pound and selling it in New York for a dollar-twenty — all without incurring any danger whatsoever!

Thus I attained the dignity of a war-profiteer, and the golden sun of prosperity began to shine upon me and mine. I freed Rose from her wage-slavery; I freed myself forever from the life of a scavenger. I cut Colonel Wharton a share of my profits, and was rewarded when he brought me — now that I had money to invest — into many a profitable venture. I invited him to the plantation, and visited his home; I came to know his dull wren of a wife, with her deplorable hats and her nasal midwestern twang. For the first time I laid eyes upon his daughter Elmira — then little

*more than an auburn-haired girl, but already giving promise of voluptuous beauty to come.*

*At first my mutilation frightened her — she thought me some sort of monster, in which she was more than half right — but in time my ready wit, and the small presents I brought her, made me a great favorite, the more so as she came to pity me. I smiled at her and listened to her chatter, and told her closely cropped versions of my sufferings, for which she pitied me the more.*

*Elmira, of course, was a project for the future; 'twas pleasant to think that again I had a future. By the winter of 1864 I was back in town for good, and living in fair comfort with Rose in a pleasant cottage in the Third District. And the following spring, peace returned at last.*

It had been a fine and busy day — wearying, but the kind of weariness that felt good. A whole new chapter completed, the household running like clockwork, everything normal again, just as it ought to be.

When evening shadows gathered, the old man lay at rest, lapped in clean linen, inhaling the smells of rubbing alcohol, bourbon, and the sour saplike odor of raw opium that lingered in the air. Before sleep took him, he again invited Morse to sit on the foot of the bed, and for a few minutes the two men spoke frankly — or at any rate, one of them did.

"I have no one to be my child save only you, Morse," Lerner told him, feeling a curious finicky unwillingness to call himself Morse's father in so many words.

Morse missed the distinction. "Yes. But because of my skin, you use me as a servant, not a son."

"When I die," said Lerner, "you will learn how much I view you as a son."

Morse gazed at him searchingly, as if to read his true thoughts. "Do you encourage me to have hopes, Father?" asked he, almost in a whisper.

"No," said Lerner. "I encourage you to have expectations."

Morse turned away, and a dry sob seemed to rack his chest. "I am sorry, Father, for the trouble I give you," he said humbly, then turned off the lights and left, closing the door to the den noiselessly behind him.

In the dark, Lerner lay back smiling, and played for a time with the thought of actually leaving Morse some substantial sum. How that would

outrage the respectable white society of New Orleans! How it would kill them to see a Negro made richer than they could ever hope to be!

But was that really necessary? Lerner's will, after providing somewhat meagerly for his servants — Morse was down for a hundred dollars and his second-best suit — left most of his millions to found a library. A strange bequest for a man who'd seldom read a book since leaving Yale, but the point (as with the vaster gift made for the same purpose by Andrew Carnegie) was the fact that his name would be chiseled over the building's door.

Anyway, merely by giving Morse hope, which cost nothing, he'd safeguarded his own comfort. Truly, he thought, in walking with a demon one learns many things, including the fact that faith, hope, and love — those supposed virtues — may become chains with which to bind a spirit.

Still smiling, he fell asleep, and all the dark hours his next chapter wrote itself, ready to be transcribed in the morning by his hand.

## **CHAPTER THE FOURTH**

### ***Wherein I Triumph During the Reconstruction***

*One April evening, as I sat in the little courtyard behind our house, sipping a glass of tolerable whiskey and watching sunset streamers unfurl across the sky, the gate hinges creaked and a well-attired colored man entered and extended his hand. So quietly did Royal reenter my life.*

*Smiling at the stranger who once had been my playmate in Eden, I invited him to sit down and called Rose to bring a clean glass. When she saw Royal, she fairly ran from the kitchen, blushing and smiling in her pleasure. Then she recovered her customary demure ways, and asked him how he did. He said well, and she placed her small hand for an instant in his large one, before returning with a light step to making supper. I poured Royal a whiskey, he offered me a segar, and for a time we sipped and smoked, whilst covertly observing each other to see what changes the years had made.*

*"Nick, I hear you've become a Union man," he said at length, his voice strong and firm with the habit of command.*

*"Yes," I replied dryly. "'Twas conversion by the sword."*

*He laughed. "You were smart to make the change. Now me — I've*

been discharged from the army, and mean to enter politics as soon as my people get the vote. They'll need leadership, and I can supply that."

I said quietly, "Watch your back."

He leaned forward and peered at my face. "Nick, I hope you ain't like the Bourbons, who learned nothing and forgot nothing."

"You've been reading history, I see."

"Yes. And mean to make some."

"Royal," said I, "this city is full of people who have learned nothing and forgotten nothing. And most of them know how to shoot."

Indeed, they were returning every month by the hundreds — beaten soldiers, political exiles — like red-hot pumice stones raining down in the aftermath of an eruption. I saw them every day about the streets, people with pinched faces and missing limbs, the most desperate bending over garbage heaps behind the great hotels.

Royal was unimpressed. "Well, we'll have to work together to rebuild. I want to offer the former rebels the hand of friendship."

I smiled a little, thinking what was likely to happen to a hand so extended. But I said diplomatically, "Away with the past! Let us live for the future!"

Rose called out that supper was ready, we emptied our glasses, and Royal departed. When I went inside, I saw that she had laid three places at the table. She said in a disappointed voice, "He didn't stay to eat!"

"Why should he stay to eat?"

"Well, he was one of our people, after all."

"No longer," I answered, "now he belongs only to himself."

I piled into my food, still smiling at Royal's notion that Yank and Rebel could work together to rebuild our shattered world. Oh yes, my deals with Colonel Wharton shewed that Blue and Gray could be brought together by the color Green. But well I knew that the spectrum of the time contained also a deep crimson stripe — the color of rage, of unburied hate, of blood-vengeance.

As if to confirm my belief, a few days later a strange man with a scarred face limped through our gate at sunset, when as usual I was drinking alone. He introduced himself as Brigadier General Eleazar Hobbs, late of the Confederate Army.

I said quickly, "I am a poor man."

"I haven't come to ask for money," he said with a grim smile. "I've heard that you too wore the gray."

This I acknowledged, and he invited me to join a club he was forming to discuss the current state of affairs in the city, the state, and the South.

For the founder of a debating society, he asked some odd questions. Eyeing dubiously my pinned-up left sleeve, he wanted to know if I were able to handle a weapon. I still went armed, the city being so disturbed; I had long since retired the old 1860 model revolver as a memento of difficult but exciting times, and replaced it with a new-model Remington, a sweet weapon that fired up-to-date brass cartridges in place of loose powder and copper caps.

I drew this gun, cocked it, took aim at a broken flower-pot against the garden wall and blew it to pieces. Hobbs nodded thoughtfully, and for a time we chatted, his preferred topic being the intolerable arrogance of the liberated slaves. When I told him frankly that I had taken the Iron-Clad Oath and knew a number of blue-backs, he was not disturbed.

"We need a friend in the camp of the enemy," he said, and I began to understand what he wanted of me. A new and secret war was beginning, and I was being invited to serve in it — as matters turned out, to serve on both sides!

I found it an odd sort of struggle. Brigadier Hobbs and his friends let strictly alone the blue-coated soldiers who once had been their enemies, for killing them would only bring down upon the South all the calamities of years past. Instead, they shot presumptuous blacks and Republicans of all hues. The Red River in particular proved to be well named, from the hundreds of bodies that floated down it.

'Twas my old neighborhood, its byways well known to me, and I had a ready-made reason to go there, for I was attempting to regain control of Mon Repos, or what was left of it. The house had been burnt by one army or the other, or by bandits — I never learned which — but the land, with its alley of great oaks, remained. That summer, on a trip upriver I tracked and killed a man I did not know, nor why he needed killing: my sole motive being to prove my bona fides to General Hobbs.

Need I say that Monsieur Felix accompanied me? I first saw him on the boat, seated near the stern-wheel with sparkles of light gleaming through his shadowy form as he gazed at the frothing tumult of the water.



*A day later, when I had slain my man in a little wood near the levee, and was turning away, I saw him again, standing amongst the cottonwood trees with arms folded — looking on with great interest, but making no sign, like a wise teacher who lets an apt pupil learn by doing.*

*The thought struck me then that I was different, not only from the man I had been, but also from the man I might have become without his guidance. I might have been a good man; I might have been a dead man. Most likely I would have been both — good and dead!*

*In any case, why dream of what had not happened? With my latest victim lying at my feet, my whole being hummed with tigerish joy, for again I had broken the bonds of conscience and felt free to do anything. So I nodded to Monsieur Felix in a comradely way, and passed on.*

All that busy morning, with the words flowing from his mind as smoothly as the ink from his reservoir pen, Lerner had nothing to complain of, except that Morse in performing his duties seemed a touch too familiar.

*Give a nigger an inch, he thought, and he'll take an ell.* At lunchtime he spoke firmly, saying that discretion was the first thing he would look for in any man who aspired to be his principal heir.

"In short," said Morse, his voice as pettish as a spoiled child, "despite what you said last night, in the sight of the world I am to go on being your nigger-man."

Hearing him use the same word, as if they shared a bond of mind as well as blood, gave Lerner an odd feeling. He answered almost defensively:

"I have never treated you so, but as a member of my household and as my right-hand man. Think about it, and see if I do not tell the truth."

Whether convinced or not, Morse apologized again, and after serving the meal and cutting the meat for him, departed as silently as an Arabian Nights servitor. Smiling, Lerner refilled his pen, set to work, and the tale emerged without a single deletion or correction, like the automatic writing of a seer.

*Back in town, I began to find my true role in the Reconstruction. Not as a killer, of whom there were more than enough, but as a peacemaker — a reconciler of differences. Who could be a better go-between than I,*

who had lost a limb for the Cause, yet had sworn loyalty to the Union! I spoke to each side in their own language, and my tongue moved freely, as if hinged in the middle.

Without undue arrogance, I aver that within a few years I became an indispensable man. Most of my time was spent in the lobby of our statehouse — the pompous, gold-domed, elegantly decaying St. Louis Hotel — where blood enemies combined forces to build a new ruling class upon the ruins of the old.

Ah, I can see it now! The walls covered with stained and tattered silk; the floor scattered with spittoons, of which there never were enough, for the Turkey carpet was foul with spittle. I see servants hastening about with tall amber bottles and trays of crystal goblets that ping at the touch. I see the all-male crowd, smell the hazy bitter segar-smoke, hear the whispered conferences, feel between my fingers the stiff smooth rag paper as drafts of pending bills whisper and slide from hand to hand. And amongst the portly scoundrels with their embroidered vests and gleaming watch-chains, I perceive a rail-thin figure that flickers and comes and goes like a mirage, his one good eye gleaming like a splinter of glass.

One day when I was busy conniving, someone touched my shoulder. I turned to find Royal smiling at me. He was rising fast in the postwar chaos — a former slave who could read and write and knew how to exercise power. The tattered slave-boy had become a soldier, the soldier a state senator and a man to reckon with, through his influence over the Negro legislators.

"Nick," he said, "I might have known I should find you in a den of thieves."

"Come, Senator," I jested. "Governor Wharton would not like to hear a fellow Republican so describe his friends and supporters!"

He shook his head, smile broadening. "Nick, there is something uncanny about you. That a one-armed Rebel should emerge as the governor's — what's a polite word for it — "

"Legislative agent, shall we say?"

"Just so. The Master of the Lobby. You know, my constituents are all black folk, and from them I hear whispers that at night you transform into a Klansman — although that I refuse to believe!"

*"I hope you disbelieve it, mon vieux, for that is a vile slander put about by the envy and malice of my enemies."*

*"I rejoice to hear it. Nick, I wonder...can you tell me whether the Governor has decided to sign my bill?"*

*"The one to legalize marriage between blacks and whites! I think he will swallow it, but only if sweetened with a spoonful of sugar."*

*He made a face. "How much?"*

*We quickly struck a bargain. The governor wished the Legislature to charter a rather improbable railroad, whose stock promised a handsome return from foreign investors ignorant of the fact that it was to run through a fathomless swamp. Royal agreed to swing the necessary votes in the Senate, and I guaranteed him a certain quantity of the stock to pass around.*

*He said with relief, "Old Wharton is so greedy, I thought he would want a bag full of gold!"*

*"No, there's more money in railroads. However, his daughter, the lovely Elmira, is soon to enter society, and a thousand dollars toward the cost of her ball and ball-gown would help to seal the bargain."*

*That was how things were done in Louisiana. But why do I say were? And why do I imply that things were done differently in General Grant's Washington, or Boss Tweed's New York? Yet some differences between North and South did exist: as was proved by a Mardi Gras ball I gave early in March, 1870, and the crisis that followed, making and unmaking so many lives.*

*Although my house now stands deep within the city, in those times it stood upon the Uptown fringes of settlement. I designed it myself, a place of stained glass and gables and towers and spires, all painted garishly as an Amazon frog, in a deliberate affront to the classical taste of the age I grew up in.*

*Within, gaslight glittered upon glass and silver, upon long tables piled with steaming food, upon champagne that flowed in sparkling rivers. The noisy throng was a patchwork of colors and a Babel of languages — a muster-roll of all who were corrupt, entertaining, and important in our world. How different from this dismal Twentieth Century, when white and black are hardly permitted to breathe the same air!*

*I took pleasure in inviting men of all races and factions, and women of all professions, including the oldest. I hoped they might amuse me by striking a few sparks from one another — little dreaming upon what tinder those sparks would fall.*

*At the time I was still a bachelor; Rose was doing the honors as hostess, and Royal asked her to dance. My dismay was great when I saw Brigadier Hobbs staring at them: they were a handsome couple, carved as it were of teakwood and ivory. But in Hobbs's scarred face burned the eyes of a crouching wolf.*

*I can hear the music now — a waltz called (I think) Southern Roses — and the stiff rustling of the women's gowns like the rush of wind through dry autumnal trees, and the scrape of dancing feet. When the guests were leaving, an hour or two before dawn, Royal pounced upon me. He was in a strange mood, exalted and more than a little drunk.*

*"Didn't I tell you that reconciliation would come? May our connection grow ever closer!" he exclaimed, almost crushing my one remaining hand.*

*"May it be so!" I replied, striving to retrieve my fingers intact.*

*"'Tis very late, Nick — or rather, very early — but I have a proposal to make. Could we speak privately for a moment?"*

*The word "proposal" passed me by entirely. I bowed him into my den — into this very room, where as a crippled old man I sit in a wheeled chair, writing. And here he rather grandly announced, in terms even then old-fashioned, that he desired to form "an honorable union" with Rose.*

*'Twas the worst shock I'd had in years. Rapid visions flashed across my brain of how Brigadier Hobbs and his friends would react, should a member of their society allow such a marriage to take place.*

*"Brother," I said, swallowing my feelings with difficulty, "I'm honored by your confidence. Of course, I must commune with my cousin. I fear that your proposal might place her in great peril."*

*"She is resolved to face it with me."*

*"That sentiment does her honor. But speak to her I must."*

*"Of course," said he, bowing like a dancing-master. "I shall return in — shall we say a week! — for your answer."*

*No sooner had he left than I confronted Rose, who met me with a face both scared and determined. I dragged her into the den and shut the door*

to exclude the servants, who were busy gathering up the fragments of the feast.

"How dare you connive at this lunacy!" I demanded, grinding my teeth.

"I dare, because it is time for me to be born!" she declared. "Here I am, twenty-six years old — almost too old to marry. And what have I ever been but an orphan, a poor relation, a seamstress to the Yankee army, and a housekeeper to you? I have never had a life! And I am resolved to have one now, ere it is too late!"

"This affair must have a long background!" I raged. "Yet you never confided in me, though I stole and killed for you."

"You stole and killed because you are a thief and a murderer!" she replied. "Royal is worth twenty of you. Did you know that long ago when we were children, he would risk a whipping to sneak upstairs and bring me flowers? That he would sit on the floor and tell me about his adventures, whilst you never talked to me at all, except to say good morning and good-bye!"

"What!" I thundered, "has it been going on that long?"

"He is a strong, wise man with a brilliant future. Have you forgotten that he killed that beastly Monsieur Felix to save me?"

It quite maddened me to hear that when I killed I was a murderer, but when Royal did the same he was a paladin.

"Royal shot the Overseer for his own revenge — you were incidental. You have always been incidental, Rose, a mere burden for others to carry, dead weight upon the road of life."

"Cochon!" she cried, and slapped me so hard my head rang. Then, weeping, she flung open the door and fled upstairs to her bedroom.

I closed the door again, took a dusty bottle from the tantalus and poured a triple brandy. I had swallowed about half, when a movement in the corner of my eye caused me to turn.

I can see the room as it was then — indeed, as it still is, save for the electric lights: the heavy red draperies; the dark crouching furniture; the small iron safe; the broad burled walnut desk; and the wavering shadows cast over everything by a gasolier's twelve flickering bluish points of flame. Against a wall covered with expensive French paper, something moved — a black shadow cast by nothing tangible.

"Well," I demanded, "what the devil shall I do?"

A very apt way of speaking, all things considered. And in that instant I knew — knew how to handle the situation — as if I had spent years and years planning every detail.

I finished the drink, climbed the stairs and went to Rose's room, where she lay sobbing upon the bed. Sitting down beside her, I spoke in the quiet, calm voice of a man who has regained his sanity after an emotional storm.

I reminded her that we were linked by blood, that we had been children together, that we had shared many perils and helped each other to survive terrible times. I lamented that we had both said things we should not have said. I said that she ought to have prepared me for Royal's proposal, which had come as a great shock.

"I ask only that you take a little time to be sure, my dear. I have but recently cleared the taxes from Papa's old land near Red River, and must take a brief trip there to get a new survey made. If, when I return, you are still resolved to marry Royal, you shall find me a champion of your right to choose him, and his to choose you. And you shall have a dowry proportioned to my wealth and your deserts."

We wept together; I begged forgiveness a thousand times. She called me her dearest friend, her other self, the best and most understanding of men. I have never known why women believe the things men tell them — or vice versa.

In my bedroom I smoked a last segar, smiling without mirth as I saw with clear, unimpeded vision how the demon had saved and shaped my whole life to this very end. "Damn it all to hell," I exclaimed, "je m'en fiche! I don't care!"

But in that I lied. I cared, but knew that I could no longer change my course, which was fixed for all time. And perhaps beyond time as well.

Next morning, without the slightest warning, after days of quiet, all the arrangements meant to secure Lerner's comfort broke down at once.

He woke from opulent dreams, as rich as those recorded in DeQuincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. Dreams of caravans pacing across deserts where the light was blindingly intense; of chiming camel-bells and wailing flutes; of dark-eyed houris glancing through silken veils

that covered swaying howdahs; of Mameluke guards with crooked swords and prancing horses; of lavish pavilions where dancing girls twirled on rose carpets to the twanging of dulcimers.

And, yes, Monsieur Felix had been there, smiling his razor-thin smile and rubbing his hands like a master of ceremonies whose every gesture seems to say, "What wonders our performers will show you tonight!"

Then Lerner woke, tasting ashes as usual, and saw Cleo's scared face and chignon peeping around the bedroom door like a polka-dotted messenger of doom. He didn't even have time to ask what had gone wrong when she blurted out, "Oh, Mr. Nick, Morse he been arrested, him!" And burst into tears.

The rest of the morning was spent unraveling what had happened the preceding night. It wasn't easy. Two years back, with great reluctance Lerner had allowed a telephone to be installed in his house. But Morse had done all the calling, and when the old man wheeled himself into the hall to use it, he discovered that the box had been placed too high on the wall for him to reach.

So his questions had to be passed through Cleo — who was hysterical — and after he sent her away, through the cook, a sullen woman with the improbable name of Euphrosyne, an import from South Carolina with a Gullah accent as dark and impenetrable as a flagstone. The information from the other end of the line (first from Lerner's lawyer, later from a police captain named Hennessy) had to come back by the same cross-African pathway.

But the old man was persistent, and knew how to offer Hennessy a bribe without actually using the word. So he learned that what the captain called "your pet nigger" was the talk of Storyville, where — it now appeared — he'd been a familiar figure for years, known for dispensing money (*whose money?*) with a free hand, and for his rough way with the women in the cribs and colored brothels. A piano player called Professor Jelly Roll had already produced a "jass" composition in his honor, called *Mr. Morse's Blues*.

Lerner knew nothing of so-called jass music, except that it was said to be noisy. But as the story unfolded, he began to feel that Morse from his very conception had been headed for this reckoning. Apparently he began his evening with a few pipes of opium at some den near the docks that he'd

discovered while procuring the drug for Lerner. Heading home, he entered a street-car while still befuddled and, finding it crowded, sat down on a bench meant for whites. The conductor and motorman ordered him to vacate it and stand behind a yellow sign that courteously stated *This Section Is Reserved for Our Colored Patrons Only*. Morse refused, and courtesy perished as the two men hustled him off the car and flung him into a mud puddle.

Considerably disheveled, Morse repaired to a saloon that served Negroes whiskey through a back window. He swallowed a few quick shots of courage and proceeded to a bawdy-house to seek further comfort. His choice of establishment was either deliberate arrogance or a grave mistake. The Madame, a fearsome mulattress who called herself Countess Willie V. Piazza, had built a fine business by providing handsome colored women to a clientele of white men only. She took one look at Morse — mahogany-hued, smelling of drink and much the worse for wear — and refused him admittance. When he forced his way inside anyway, she summoned the police, and Morse topped off a busy night by assaulting not one but two brawny Irishmen.

With Hennessy's assistance, Lerner's lawyer found Morse in a cell of Parish Prison, where the police had been amusing themselves by playing drum-rolls on his ribs with their billyclubs. Bribes were necessary merely to preserve his life; when he was dragged before a magistrate, the lawyer had to guarantee his bail. Prison remained a distinct possibility, only (the lawyer warned) to be averted by still more bribes. When Morse at length was returned home by cab, Lerner not only had to pay the hackman, he had to hire a doctor to tend Morse at two dollars a visit. By evening of a day of upheaval, Morse was lying in his room upstairs, the doctor had cleaned his wounds and strapped his ribs, and Lerner was in a greater rage than was safe for an elderly man.

*Damn him!* he thought. *Were he not a kinsman, I would let him sink or swim! Doesn't he know what can happen to a man of color in the grip of our police?*

Well, of course he knew. It was just that Morse, Lerner's pet from his birth, protected by the walls of this house, hadn't thought it could happen to him.

Next morning — sleepless, ill-shaven, nerves ragged for lack of his



drug, back pains lancing him like sparks of pure white fire — the old man returned ashen-tongued and red-eyed to his task, under a compulsion made somehow worse by the events of yesterday.

## CHAPTER THE FIFTH

### *Wherein the Demon Proves the Real Winner*

*As a burning sun rose over the Father of Waters, I boarded a steam packet on the levee at Felicity Street. I had already visited a telegraph-office, and sent two local wires, one to Royal and one to Brigadier Hobbs.*

*Whilst the shore fell away, I stood gazing upon the broad churning wake of the stern-wheel, and the wide, ever-busy river beyond. I watched the crowded riverboats; the sleek steamers from overseas trailing plumes of ash from their smoke-stacks; the sailboats with little patched sails, and the scows with men hauling at the sweeps; the green banks and the low, irregular levees; a party of church-goers clad in white gowns, being baptized in the shallows; and the floating and diving gulls that screamed in harsh voices.*

*Amidst all this busy life, I felt a strange loneliness, as if for all my wealth and influence I was but a gypsy and a wanderer upon the earth. My earlier homicides had been easy enough, for I had slain men who meant nothing to me. Perhaps I was not yet entirely what my master had designed me to be, for the thought that I must now play the role of Cain lay upon my heart like a stone. Somehow, through many years of dark deeds I had preserved the memory of my time of innocence, in which Royal played so large a part. Even if the tale told in the Bible be true, which I doubt, a vengeful God merely cast Adam out of Eden: he did not demand that he go back and befoul the very fountains of his former Paradise with blood.*

*Hoping to shake off my melancholy, I started to take a brisk turn about the deck, but stopped when I saw a well-known figure sitting at the bow, still as a carved figurehead. So the Overseer was coming along to see his revenge accomplished. I was not surprised — after all, the patient devil had waited nine years for it.*

*At Red River Landing, a tolerable inn survived, and I engaged a room. The town was muddy and straggling as in times gone by, but it boasted*

two or three steamboats tied up and unloading, with black laborers not unlike the slaves of yesteryear — indeed, they were the slaves of yesteryear — chanting work songs as they trotted up and down the gangplanks, with heavy loads miraculously balanced on their heads.

In my room, I laid my pistol upon the usual marble-top table, beside the usual chipped wash basin and flowered pitcher. Then I lay down to rest upon an ill-smelling featherbed, drawing a dusty musketo-net about me. My thoughts were sombre, but I did not have long to indulge them. Came a knock on the door, and the innkeeper — a huge man with smaller eyes in a larger face than I ever saw before — handed me two telegrams, and stood waiting whilst I read. I put the telegrams under my stump and began to fish in my waistcoat pocket for a coin.

"I'm not wanting a tip," he said in a low drawling grumble of a voice. "General Hobbs has contacted me. Where'd you lose the wing?"

"Shiloh. Better come into the room." He nodded and followed me.

"I was there too," he said. "I saw General Johnston killed. The minny-ball broke an artery in his leg; he turned white as cotton and bled to death in half a minute. Is this a matter of honor, or politics?"

"Both. You'll find that I know how to be grateful."

"I'm sure." Despite omitting the *r*, he made two syllables out of sure. "You want the nigger to go slow, or fast?"

"Fast."

"Night or day?"

"He's no fool. He won't go out at night. And you don't want him killed here."

"So it's daytime, then, which means masks and an ambush."

In whispers we completed our arrangements. After engaging his horse and buggy for the morrow, I explained that I had grown up nearby.

"I'm from Arkansaw, myself," he said. "You owned the nigger in the old days?"

"Yes."

"Ah," said he, sadly shaking his massive head. "They was happier then." He left the room with a surprisingly silent tread, for so big a man.

Everything was in readiness. I dined without appetite, slept poorly, but was waiting at the dock with the landlord's buggy when Royal strode ashore from the morning packet. As if impersonating himself, he was all

strut and boldness, jaunty and dressed in flash attire — a claw-hammer coat and top hat — at which blacks and whites alike turned and stared. I hailed him, and he leaped into the buggy, which swayed under his weight, and gripped my hand.

"Nick," he exclaimed, "Never did I think we would meet here again, and for such a reason!"

I said, "Since you're a bird with two wings, perhaps you'll drive!"

He took the reins and snapped them with the casual ease of a country-bred man. The horse shook its mane and the buggy rolled with a jingle of little bells along the old familiar road that led to the ruins of Mon Repos. The day was fine, the ground dry and the spring weather cool and bright, with fair-weather clouds above, and great shadows flitting soundlessly over woods and meadows.

As we drove, I plunged into recollection, chattering nervously in a manner most unusual for me. Royal (a great talker) responded in kind, and soon we were pointing and exclaiming as if we were boys again. My school had been reduced to a few scattered bricks, and 'midst the ruins of the church I saw — fallen and rusting — the iron bell that once had tolled for the death of a world. We turned into a dim track, where tall grass brushed the underside of the carriage with the sound of rubbed velvet. Near the stark chimney that alone had survived the fall of Mon Repos, Royal tugged at the reins and we halted.

For a minute or so we sat silent. Then he said, "I was amazed at your telegram, Nick."

"I designed it to be amazing."

"Frankly, Rose and I were prepared to defy you, if need be. But how fine it is that you consent to our marriage — and that you intend this land to be Rose's marriage portion!"

"I could imagine nothing that would please either of you more than to own Mon Repos," I replied. "It's the logical dowry."

I watched covertly as Royal's natural wariness dissolved in the grip of irresistible emotion. "To own the land where I was once a slave!" he exclaimed, his voice choking midway in the sentence.

He gazed like one transfixed down the long alley of noble oaks, where gray streamers of moss floated on the breeze with the silent grace of shadows. I began to talk about the taxes, the difficulty of getting tenants

to work the fields, and the need for a new survey, since most of the old landmarks had disappeared.

"Those were to have been my problems," I said. "Now I fear they will be yours. And you must be on your guard, my friend. The Klan's active hereabouts — you're safe enough in daytime, but a prominent colored man with a white wife should beware the night."

He grinned and raised the tail of his fawn-colored coat to shew a handsome silver-mounted pistol in a holster of tooled leather hanging from a wide cartridge-belt.

"I am prepared for anything," he said.

I shook my head at his fatal arrogance. How can a man be prepared for anything?

"Ah, look," I said, pointing, "do you remember that path? It led to our swimming-hole, did it not?"

He turned and craned, and as he did so a figure in robe and hood stepped from behind the chimney and raised a rifle. A shot exploded, and the round buzzed past me.

Frightened, the horse reared and whinnied. The buggy tilted; I grabbed at the reins and struggled one-handed to get the animal under control. Meantime, like a good soldier Royal leaped to the ground and rolled and fired.

His shot killed the idiot in spook attire, and the Klansman's hand, contracting in death, squeezed off a round that struck the horse in the brain. The animal crashed in the traces, the buggy overturned, and I was flung out and landed with a thump.

Well, the whole thing was a hopeless mess. I scrambled past a wildly spinning wheel, jumped to my feet, and found that I was alone amid the ruins of Mon Repos.

The assassin lay like a heap of soiled bedclothes on the ground. Royal had vanished into a nearby stand of trees, and I heard shouts and shots and the crashing of men plunging through the dense second-growth of pine and sweetgum saplings.

A shotgun boomed. Silence for six or seven heartbeats, then two revolver shots, Blam! Blam!

Desperate to learn what was happening, I drew my pistol and followed the sounds into the trees. The wind seemed to hold its breath;

*invisible birds were screaming, but the noise of the fire-fight had slain all movement save mine.*

*I paused and stood listening. The shotgun boomed again close by, followed by a revolver shot and a strangled outcry. I hastened through the blinding tangle, panting, inhaling the reek of sulphur mingled with the wine-cork smell of spring growth.*

*In a little glen I found a figure weltering in the grass — another hooded man, a big one. I lifted the hood and saw the landlord's broad face and tiny eyes. He had been shot through the throat, and his sharp little eyes turned to dull pebbles as I watched.*

*A new fury of shots broke out. A deathly pale young man broke from the thicket and ran past me, his breath rattling like a consumptive's. He ran like a hare, this way and that, either to make aiming difficult or simply in the madness of fear. Then he was gone, and I was alone with Royal.*

*I whispered bitterly, "You might have spared me this."*

*I had not forgotten all woodcraft, and slipped without a sound past slender pale trunks and rough pine branches, over thorny mats of wild grape and thick dying undergrowth. In the treetops strong sunlight vibrated, but down in the tangle evening colors — blue and bronze — enveloped me. Then I stumbled on a heap of dry wood, something cracked under my feet, and behind me Royal's voice said, "Hello, Nick."*

*I turned and faced him. He leveled his revolver and said, "Your weapon."*

*A smile of relief began to cross my lips, and he said more sharply, "Come, come — your weapon! And let me tell you, brother, you have but little to smile about."*

*In that he was wrong, for I was watching Monsieur Felix emerge from the ruins of his house. Then that unforgettable voice ground out, Aha, tu p'tit diable!*

*Royal turned his head, and looked into the one glinting eye and the one oozing pit. That was when I shot him down, and shot him again where he lay.*

*For a long moment the Overseer and I stood gazing at each other over the body. He smiled, that thin smile I remembered so well, like an arroyo between his blade of a nose and blue hillock of a chin. I hated him then,*

*yet not half so much as I hated myself, for having sold my destiny forever to such an one as he.*

*Then, like a shadow struck by light, he vanished without a sound.*

Strange, very strange, he thought, rereading what he'd written. After all, his tale was a confession. But who was he confessing to? God had long ago departed from his universe, and Royal and Rose already knew his guilt, assuming they knew anything at all.

The slow approach of shuffling footsteps in the hall interrupted his brooding. Hastily he locked up his manuscript and assumed the demeanor of a hanging judge. The door opened, and Cleo and Euphrosyne together helped Morse limp in to face the music.

His face was swollen, one eye was a purple plum, and he winced at every movement from the pain of his ribs, though the doctor had told Lerner that the bones were only cracked, not broken.

The old man greeted him with silence, then waved the women away. For several long minutes Morse stood before him, his one good eye fixed in contemplation of his toes. Finally Lerner spoke in what he hoped were the tones of Fate.

"I suppose you know that you might have been beaten to death."

Morse nodded.

"I can't prevent you from embarking on such adventures again. But I can withdraw my protection. Once more, and you're on your own. Then you'll either die at the hands of the police or else go to prison where, I promise you, you'll learn many things, but nothing to make you grateful to your teachers."

Morse nodded again. He already knew that he would be forgiven one more time. How else to explain the fact that he was here, rather than lying on the oozing brick floor of the prison, watching enormous cockroaches feast on spatters of his own blood? He also knew without being told that he'd reached the end of his rope, that he'd have no more chances, and that his hopes of inheriting a portion of the old man's wealth were probably over.

What he couldn't know were the thoughts passing through Lerner's mind. The old man was looking at Morse but, still full of the story he'd been writing, thinking not of him but of himself and Royal.

*Well, we all come to it in time — we are broken down to ground-level, and must construct ourselves anew. If we survive, we become stronger: with few exceptions we do not become better. For most of us, when all else has failed, turn to the demon.*

He drew a deep breath, said, "Sit down," and watched Morse relapse, wincing, into the same chair — now battered and dusty — where Rose had sat so long ago.

Opening the safe, Lerner took out a fist-sized parcel of rice paper. He unwrapped it, revealing a sticky dark mass of opium. The doctor had obtained it for him at a handsome markup; he used the drug in his practice, and made sure that it was legally bought.

From the tantalus, Lerner lifted a crystal flask of bourbon and two shot glasses. By now Morse had raised his one good eye and was watching as if mesmerized. Lerner prepared two shots of laudanum and offered one to Morse.

After they had both swallowed their medicine, and the mixture was spreading a slow fiery comfort through their veins, Lerner delivered his verdict: "Hereafter, Morse, you will use the drug with me in these rooms, and nowhere else."

"Yes," he mumbled. "Yes, Father."

"I take that as your word of honor," said the old man, noting wryly how odd the word *honor* tasted on his tongue. "If you break it, I will have no mercy on you. Now help me to bed. Tomorrow you'll do only what is most necessary, and otherwise rest."

The bedtime ritual that night was even slower than usual, with Morse wincing — sometimes gasping — with pain, and pausing again and again to recover. Lerner had plenty of time to think, and what he thought about was how, in one way or another, he'd lost everyone who had ever been close to him: Elmira, his and Elmira's children, Papa, Rose, and Royal.

All of them gone. Soon he would be gone too. But it was still within his power to save something from the wreckage, through a man of his blood who would live on after him. *He is, after all, the last of our family and, even if adopted, the only son I shall ever have. But if he continues the way he's going, he will die too, and nobody will be left at all.*

Old people have to decide things quickly, having no time for the long

thoughts of youth. He resolved to act tomorrow — summon his lawyer and settle everything while Morse lay resting upstairs in bed. Lerner's old habits of deep suspicion didn't quite leave him, for he also thought: *Better not tell the boy. I know what I might do, if one old man stood between me and a great inheritance.*

He smiled craftily, thinking what a surprise ending he could now give his confession. Then leave it to be read once he was safely gone. Confession might be good for the soul, but if incautiously made public might be death to the body. After all, he reflected, his veins and Morse's held much the same blood.

*No one instructed me as to how I should conceal my crime (he began to write next day, after the lawyer had come and gone). Nor did anyone need to.*

*I grasped Royal's hand, dragged his carcass down into the glen, and pressed my pistol into the hand of the dead innkeeper. Then I set out briskly enough, rehearsing my story as I went, and after disarranging my clothing, staggered into Red River Landing, crying out a shocking tale of ambush and sudden death.*

*All who saw me that day knew that I truly grieved, though they did not know why. General Hobbs, of course, knew what had happened, but my secret was safe with him. Rose (I think) divined the truth, but could do nothing, having no protector but myself, and needing one more than ever, because she was with child.*

*'Twas almost miraculous, how all the pieces fell into place. The hue and cry over the murder was great, for Royal had been a rising star of the Republican Party, and his death became a hook upon which President Grant could hang new and stringent measures against the Klan. In the months that followed, I traveled to Washington thrice to testify, and made (I may say without false pride) a good job of it: in lengthy testimony on the Hill, I never made a serious error; never was at a loss for words; most important of all, never told the truth.*

*Based largely upon my testimony, Congress concluded that two loyal Union men had been attacked by Klansmen, one being killed and other barely escaping with his life. The outrage led directly to passage of the Ku Klux Act, which caused so much trouble to General Hobbs and his*



friends: 'twas under that law he was later arrested for some trifling murder, tried by military commission, and sent to Fort Leavenworth, where he died.

Thereafter I was a marked man amongst his followers, as I was already a pariah to all who hated the Yankee occupation. Yet isolation was familiar to me, and I was not unhappy to be rid of so impulsive and violent a friend. For great changes were in the air, and a cool head was needed to take advantage of them. In 1873 a depression devastated the Grant administration, which was already falling by the weight of its own corruption. Another three years, and the Democrats seized power in Louisiana; Governor Wharton was impeached, and departed public life with a fortune (said to be in the range of two millions) to comfort his old age.

He paid me a handsome price for my land near Red River, and there built the grand and intricate monstrosity of a house he calls Réunion. He sited his mansion at the end of the great oak alley, clearing away the old chimney in the process, and the ruins of Monsieur Felix's house as well, which spoiled his view. 'Twas in this house, in rooms that were perfect symphonies of bad taste, that I courted his daughter Elmira, and won her consent to be my bride.

The marriage was sumptuous. Like the great slave-owners he had always secretly admired, the Governor displayed an instinct for magnificence. As the wedding day approached, he imported from South America hundreds of spiders known for the beauty of their webs and turned them loose in the oaks. When their shining orbs had taken form, with his own hand he cast handfuls of gold dust upon the threads.

Up this astounding aisle, more splendid than any cathedral, 'midst golden glitter and dancing sunlight he led Elmira, clad in ashes-of-roses chenille and watered silk and Brussels lace, to where I waited for her beside the soaring staircase of Réunion. There we were wed, and the parson prayed that our marriage might symbolize an end to the strife which had so long bloodied the State and the Nation.

After kissing my bride, I embraced my new father-in-law with one arm, whilst he hugged me with two. Tears leaked into his whiskers as he saw his family joined forever to what he liked to call, in hushed tones, "the old aristocracy."

Rose's story was less glorious. Eight months after Royal's death, she gave birth to an infant which she freely acknowledged to be his.

I was by then a busy man, between my Washington trips and my courting of Elmira, and was at some difficulty to cover things up. In the end I arranged for Rose to visit Natchez in the character of a widow, accompanied by a discreet woman of my acquaintance. There a hale and noisy male infant passed through the gates of life, and entered this world of sin. The final act of the tragedy came when Rose died of a hemorrhage resulting from a difficult labor. Well, she had always been sickly and frail — not a good candidate to bear a large and lusty man-child!

I was somewhat at a loss what to do with this new and (at first) unwelcome kinsman of mine. I expected to have children with Elmira. Along with the Old South had vanished those easygoing days when a large brood of varicolored youngsters, some slave and some free, some legitimate and some bastards, could all be raised together under one paternal eye. Since then a certain niceness and propriety had come into life, and appearances had to be preserved.

I named the boy Morse, an uncommon name for a black. At the time I knew not why I chose it, though I now believe 'twas a strangled echo of the remorse I felt over his father's death. I hoped that he might be light in hue and featured like an European, which would have made everything easier. But in a few weeks it became plain that — despite a double infusion of white blood, from his mother and his father's father — robust Africa was stamped firmly and forever upon his visage.

I put him out to be suckled by a wet-nurse in the Creole quarter, and this woman solved the problem for me. Recently she had lost an infant and been abandoned by her lover; she longed for a child, and she needed work. I took her into my household as a maid, where she remained until her death, representing herself to Morse as his mother. I believe that this woman, spotting a certain ghostly similarity in our features, decided that Morse must be my bastard, and in time passed on this bit of misinformation to her charge.

Yet he was my kinsman, and discreetly I watched over his raising, as in the past Papa had watched over Royal's. He grew strong and clever, learned to read and write and cipher to the rule of twelve, and in my service was trained to the duties of an upper servant. The walls of my

house shielded him from much that was happening to his people in the outside world where, abandoned by the North, they were made into serfs by the South.

All unknowing, I was preparing a caretaker for myself. Ever since I had angered the Klan, a series of events had placed my life in danger: I but narrowly escaped two assassination attempts, and once had my house set on fire (though so incompetently that the blaze was readily extinguished). I hired Pinkertons to protect me, and for a time the attempts ended. But in '93, on busy Canal Street at noonday, an empty four-horse dray came careening around a corner and knocked me to the ground. The vehicle swerved around the next corner, and vanished: 'twas later found abandoned in a weedy lot near the river, the horses unbridled and peacefully cropping grass. The driver was never discovered — or so the police reported.

Thus by a spinal injury I became an invalid at the age of fifty, when otherwise still vigorous and in the prime of life. Believing that my former associates had forgotten nothing and forgiven nothing, I turned increasingly into a recluse, dependent upon Morse, the only caregiver I felt that I could trust. And so —

Unnoticed by Lerner, dusk had come, and with it came Morse, barging through the door with a touch of his old insouciance, despite his stiffness and the plum over his eye, carrying the dinner tray in which the old man felt no interest, and the drug he truly needed.

Lerner hastily put away his manuscript and closed the safe. Toward the food he made only a gesture, swallowing a forkful here and there and thrusting the rest away. After he had been settled for the night, Morse sat down beside the bed on a footstool, his head resting against the moss mattress, and they shared the opium.

As usual these days, one dose of laudanum wasn't enough for Lerner. The second put him into a state like the trance of a medium. He saw the specters of the past rising up about him, and whispered, "Look, look there."

"Where?"

"There, in the mirror. Can't you see him? It's Monsieur Felix! Look how his one eye gleams!"

"You're crazy, Father," Morse said, not unkindly.

"He wants me to come with him to his house. It lies halfway to the quarters, and once there I can never leave. Ah Morse, how can I tell him *No*, when I have so often told him *Yes*?"

"Rest, old man," Morse said, "for the past is dead and gone."

"No, no, 'tis a phantom limb that aches more than a real one, for there is no way to touch it, to heal it, to give it ease."

"Sleep," Morse said, and mixed him yet another dose. Lerner drank it off at a gulp, choked, gasped for a moment, then relaxed against his pillows.

Little by little the shadows of the room turned bronze, then brown. For a time the old man seemed still to be conversing with Morse; he heard voices, one of which sounded like his own, and unless mistaken he heard spoken the word *perdu*. But the voices became still; he found himself enjoying a brilliant scene of people waltzing at a masked ball. Then nothing.

Next morning he woke with his head, as usual, filled with ashes. For a time he lay in bed, unable even to reach for the bell. When his mind cleared, he rang as usual, but no Morse appeared. Nor anyone else.

After ringing again and again, Lerner, cursing, stretched out a trembling arm, drew the wheelchair beside the bed and despite a shock of pain, wrestled himself into it. Where the devil was everyone? He trundled to the door of his den and flung it open.

The safe door stood ajar. He rolled into the room and put a trembling hand inside. The manuscript was gone. *Well*, thought Lerner, *he was always a clever fellow*.

The house was utterly silent. Morse must have sent Cleo and the cook away. Lerner spun the chair this way and that. What to do, what to do? The telephone was out of reach, and anyway Morse might be waiting in the hallway. The old man peered back into the bedroom, but with only the one barred window it was a trap without an exit. He couldn't lock himself into the den, for the key to the hall door had vanished years ago — possibly removed by Morse, so that he could enter at will.

And he'd put his life into the hands of this man! Soon he'd be coming to accuse Lerner of murdering his real father. Coming with the razor, but not to shave him.

He turned to his desk, pulled out a handful of ancient bills that stuffed a pigeonhole, pushed aside a panel at the back and touched a hidden spring. A second panel opened into a dark recess. He thrust in his hand and pulled out the Remington. He clamped it muzzle-first in his left armpit, broke it open and checked the load of six brass cartridges. He snapped the weapon shut again. The hammer was stiff, but he cocked it easily with his one hand accustomed to doing the work of two.

He hid the gun under his lap robe and wheeled himself back into the bedroom. Closing the door to his den behind him, he waited for Morse — an old and crippled wolf, but not a toothless one.

Yet his first visitor appeared, not at the door, but in the mirror. Monsieur Felix couldn't bear to miss out on what was about to happen, and suddenly there he stood in the clouded pier glass — one eye gleaming, thin smile widening like an arroyo between the blue chin and the great blade of a nose. Perhaps he was too eager, for Lerner read his mind.

*Why, he wondered, did I ever imagine his vengeance would stop with Royal? Did I not call him swine, connive at his death, supply the weapon that killed him? Did I not write my confession at his command? In an opium dream, did he not cause me to speak the word perdu that let Morse open the safe? Is it not his pleasure now to destroy me and Royal's son at one stroke? For either I'll kill him and perish of my infirmities, or he'll kill me and go to the hangman for murder.*

At that moment the door slammed open and Morse entered, razor flickering in his hand. His face was swollen, his eyes drugged to pinpoints, his smile an arid duplicate of the one in the mirror. He whispered, "I've come to scrape your throat, Uncle."

Lerner pulled the revolver from under the lap robe. Morse halted like a man suddenly transmuted into stone. In the fearsome quiet that followed, Lerner spoke to him for the last time.

"Whatever else I've done in a long and mostly foul existence, Morse, remember how at the very end I saved you from the hangman's noose and gave you a new life for my brother's sake."

Two crashes of thunder. The shards of the mirror were still tinkling on the floor when Lerner slumped in his chair, the pistol slipping from his hand.

The smoke was dense, and through it Monsieur Felix, emerging from

the shattered mirror, passed like a shadow seen in fog. He stared at Lerner, absolutely baffled. The vatic power he depended upon, the power that enabled him to plan his murders a decade or more in advance — why had it been blind to this possibility?

*J'ai perdu son âme*, he thought, almost in despair. *I've lost his soul.*

Then he turned his gaze on Morse. His trademark smile slowly rekindled, as he recalled the deepest secret of the young man's life: how, as a child, he'd entered the nursery in this house, turned Elmira's son over in his crib, and pressed the baby's face into the mattress until he suffocated — all out of fear that the white child would take his own place in Lerner's favor.

Now the poor devil needed help, which Monsieur Felix was always happy to supply.

Gradually Morse recovered from his shock. First he'd forgotten to breathe; then panted like a winded animal, heart thundering. Now his breath evened, his heart slowed to a regular beat. He folded the razor and put it into his trouser pocket, while cool thoughts seemed to rise from some unshaken region of his mind.

*I must touch nothing. I must telephone the police. I must report the suicide. His illness and the drug will explain everything. And aren't the police identifying people by their finger-marks these days? Well, his finger-marks are on the pistol's grip.*

But there was something else. *The police — suppose they decide to bury the evidence and hang me as they've hung other blacks, for the mere pleasure of it?*

A thought tickled the back of his mind. *There's something in the desk.*

He turned back into the den. Took the razor out again and threw it into the safe, so it wouldn't be found on him. He slammed the iron door, spun around, knocked the pile of ancient bills off the desk and reached his arm to the elbow inside the open hidey-hole. What was he touching?

He pulled out a leather purse with a string closure, opened it and grinned at the cylinder of gold double-eagles it contained. *Why, the old devil*, he thought. *Here's his secret cache, and all the time I thought it was in the safe!*

A few bribes would enable him to handle the police, and that was all

he knew or cared about now. The fact that he would soon be rich — that he would have power beyond the imagining of ordinary people to exercise an appetite for cruelty that had grown up in him during a lifetime of stifled rage — all that remained to be discovered.

The Demon stood behind him, smiling, lending him useful thoughts, mentoring him, delighted as always to be the Overseer of human destiny.

*Aha, le p'tit diable!* whispered Monsieur Felix. *Him I won't lose.* ☞



MONOPEDALISM NEVER REALLY CAUGHT ON



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# PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

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## PAUL DI FILIPPO

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*Two CC's of Bestseller, Stat!*

"Soon, Milwaukee-area book lovers needing to check their blood pressure or just wanting information on the latest health trends will be able to do so while picking up some new reads. Milwaukee's Froedtert Hospital and the Medical College of Wisconsin will join forces this fall with the Harry W. Schwartz Bookshops in a unique collaboration to provide health information and resources to consumers. Founded in 2002, Small Stones Health Resource Center...will move into a 3,800-square-foot space next to the Harry Schwartz Bookshop in Brookfield.... Small Stones will have a full-time nurse and other health educators on hand, as well as a resource library, screenings and classes. A retail area will provide health and wellness books, wellness journals, and other products for the health-minded consumer...."

— Claire Kirch, "Harry W. Schwartz Bookshop Healthy Place to Be," *Publishers Weekly Daily*, August 15, 2006.

**T**HAT DAY at work, I was feeling a little under the weather — just a trace of flu, I hoped and believed, based on my red runny nose and scratchy throat — so I decided to stop by my local bookstore on the way home. I'd pick up a big fat juicy bestseller to while away any convalescence. And I could also indulge in a hot chocolate from the bookstore's café. That would all certainly make me feel much better.

As I headed to the Brookfield mall, I realized that I didn't go shopping often enough. I couldn't remember the last time I had visited this Harry W. Schwartz branch. Living one's life online had certain advantages, but there was nothing like good old-fashioned mingling with humanity in the flesh!

When I reached the entrance to the familiar store, I encountered something unexpected: an unusual kind of sensor gate on the order of an airport metal detector.



*Some new kind of security or anti-theft measure*, I thought, and walked on through.

But the gate beeped fiercely at my passage and I prepared for the descent of store guards, already phrasing my excuses and jokes about my innocence of shoplifting and the unwarranted sonic assault.

Instead, I was beset by two nurses! The white-clad, intensely competent-looking women swooped up on either side of me. They wore hygienic facial masks and latex gloves.

"Sir," said one, "I'm afraid our instruments reveal that you're carrying a communicable disease."

All the other nearby patrons were looking at me and shying away. I felt immediately like a leper.

"Well, perhaps a touch of flu. My throat's a bit raspy...."

"Sir, are you actually unaware of the new Schwarzenegger-Clinton Public Safety Act of 2007, which mandates that anyone wishing to utilize a commonly shared public space must possess a clean bill of health, as determined biometrically? Mutant tuberculosis alone last year accounted for ten fatalities among Harry W. Schwartz customers. If we permit you to infect your fellow booklovers, the annual bottom line of Harry W.

Schwartz could be severely impacted."

"I — I hadn't heard anything...."

One nurse handed me a pamphlet. "Here are the details, sir."

I studied the material — inside an invisible bubble of contempt maintained by my fellow bookbrowsers — before speaking.

"It seems I have only two choices. I can proceed straight home — "

"Your license plate has already been registered," one of the nurses stipulated, "and you'll be under constant automated satellite monitoring by GoogleEarth."

" — or I can submit to treatment immediately."

"So long as you have adequate healthcare insurance."

"I do."

"And do you wish to undergo treatment?"

"Well, sure, why not? I would've seen my own doctor sooner or later if I didn't get better, you know."

The eyes of the nurses managed to convey deep skepticism.

"I'm not a bad person, just a little out of touch."

"We make no moral judgments, sir. Our concern is merely guarding the public's health. Now, if you'll come with us...."

The nurses conducted me behind the sales counter and through a door.

I found myself in what was obviously an infirmary. The nurses took my health insurance information and left me alone.

It was then that I noticed something odd about the room.

Although its tiled walls and easy-to-clean floor contained a paper-topped examining table for patients, it had none of the other accouterments of a hospital. No machines, and not even a canister of tongue depressors.

Before I could unriddle this lack, a doctor entered.

In his scrubs, the man was tall, thin, and possessed a mop of red hair that stood up like a cock's comb. His face too was half-concealed by a mask.

"Dr. Gutenberg," he announced himself. "Please strip to your underwear and climb on the table, so that we can begin your treatment."

I started to unbutton my shirt. "But don't you need to examine me?"

"Not at all, not at all. We have the readouts from the scanner gate. Your treatment is pre-ordained."

Sitting in my boxers on the crinkly wax-paper, I watched as Dr.

Gutenberg opened a cupboard door and removed — a book! He began to rip pages out of it.

"This is a first edition of Jack London's *Call of the Wild*. Proven extremely effective against influenza. Effects of the pure Arctic landscape described therein. Its cost will show up on your bill, under the 'drug' heading. Not covered by your insurance, I'm afraid."

I quailed at the destruction of the valuable book, especially since I knew what it went for online. "Wait just a minute. What kind of physician are you?"

"I am a doctor of bibliostetrics. Under the Public Safety Act, we have the federal franchise for all bookstores. Now, lie on your side."

Reluctantly, I assumed the required position. Dr. Gutenberg rolled up the pages of Jack London's book into a cone, inserted the narrow end into my ear — then lit the whole affair on fire!

"Hey!"

"Don't squirm, you'll negate the treatment! Surely you've heard of 'ear-candling.' An essential part of bibliostetrics."

I quit wriggling and allowed the procedure to finish. After turning over, I underwent the same procedure in my other ear.

"Feel all better?" asked Dr. Gutenberg as I sat up.

"Not one hundred percent...."

He cupped his chin and pondered. "We'll have to perform a papier-mâché full-body wrap. Take off your shorts."

I complied. The doctor secured and plugged in a little electric pot.

"Electric glue pot. From J. Hewit and Sons. By appointment to the Queen and all that. Top quality stuff. Just like this plough blade."

Dr. Gutenberg flourished a big wood and rubber spatula.

"Now, just relax."

In a short time I was completely coated with sticky, smelly paste from the neck down. Dr. Gutenberg began to rip pages out of a different book.

"First edition *Walden*. Guaranteed to restore complete health."

Soon I was immobilized like a mummy. Curiously, I began to relax and feel better. Perhaps it was just the fumes from the glue pot. I drowsed off peacefully.

But I was jolted awake by waves of pain as Dr. Gutenberg ripped Thoreau's prose from my body! I screamed, and flailed about, accidentally grabbing Dr. Gutenberg's mask.

The naked face of the the "doctor" was immediately recognizable to me!

"You're Harry W. Schwartz the Fourth!"

"No, no, I'm Dr. Gutenberg —"

I climbed down off the table. "There's no such thing as the Schwarzenegger-Clinton Public Safety Act, is there? That entrance scanner is a fake!"

The mock doctor caved. "Yes, yes, I'll admit it! Sales were down at the store, and we came up with this scheme. The nurses are my nieces, and the contemptuous patrons were illegal immigrants hired from the Home Depot parking lot. And those weren't true first editions, just Weston Press reprints! Practically worthless, we get them for two dollars a carton."

Now the smell of the glue registered with me. "And this binder's paste is just melted brie!"

Harry W. Schwartz IV began to weep. "Left over from our last author signing! You won't press charges, will you? Milwaukee can't afford to lose another independent bookstore."

Picking off scabs of text, I said, "You realize that a lifetime supply of free hot cocoa is merely the beginning here."

Harry Schwartz IV smiled. "Wonderful. Take two free paperbacks and call me in the morning."



*K. D. Wentworth says her current projects include two novels written in collaboration with Eric Flint, *The Torus War* and a sequel to *The Course of Empire*. Her latest story is an unusual look at how difficult the teen years can be.*

# Exit Strategy

*By K. D. Wentworth*



ON THURSDAY, WHEN THE March wind was biting-chill, Charlisie put on her best black lace leggings and her new hoodie, then popped down to the Second Life Temple to donate her body.

Dead leaves skittered along the Camden sidewalk and she kicked them out of her way. Her mood was positively foul. That afternoon, she'd gotten back her Sociology paper, "The Division of Labor: How Women Always Like Get the Shaft." At the top of the front page, Mr. Shapiro, her Fifth Hour Soc teacher, had written "Dreary, Polemic, and Uninspired: C-." She'd poured the best thirty minutes of her life into that paper. It was clear now that living was not for her.

A Church of Second Life priest waited in the temple doorway as she trudged past the cut-back rose bushes, dried-out plants, and bare earth of the dormant memory gardens. Above the massive wooden doors, ONE LEAVES, ONE STAYS had been etched into the gray stone in letters two inches deep.

"So, daughter," the middle-aged man said when she was close enough,

"why have you come to us today?" He had massive football-player shoulders and was dressed in the Order's traditional navy blue trousers and shirt. His eyes conveyed the soulful gaze of a basset hound.

"I'm, like, tired of living," she said, unwrapping a piece of Tart Tangerine gum, "so, as your brochure says, I thought I'd give someone more optimistic a chance."

"Admirable," the man said. He folded his hands, which was harder than it should have been because he had huge scarred knuckles that looked like he'd gone more than a few rounds in the fight ring in his day. "Is there a reason for offering yourself at this particular moment?"

Charlsie studied the red and blue thread friendship bracelets around her wrist. Amy and Madison had given them to her when they'd all still been speaking to one another. She twisted the thread until it broke and threw the bracelets on the ground.

"Everything sucks," she said, "trying to make friends and then keep them, when they're all two-faced bitches, trying to learn the most boring stuff in the universe and then cough it back up for tests just so that one day I can work for practically nothing at some boring job. I'm tired of curfews, rules, fads, boyfriends, parents, especially my dad. Can you believe he even wants to tell me how to wear my freaking hair! You name it — I've had it!"

"I see." His voice was a murmur so that she had to move closer. "Why don't you come in and we'll discuss the matter?"

"What's to discuss?" Charlsie crossed her arms and chewed her gum as though it were her former best friend, Krissi. "And don't give me that counseling crap! I don't need anyone to tell me how to make up my own mind."

"What about parental permission?" the priest said.

His voice tried to hit a soothing note, but it had a gravelly quality. Must have taken a few punches to the throat during those fights. She jammed her hands in her hoodie pockets.

"We can't — proceed without that," the priest said patiently.

If her parents got wind of this, they would freak big-time. They had even forbidden her to get her eyebrow pierced. Her dad in particular never let her try anything cool. She practically had to get his permission to change the shade of her nail polish. "I just turned eighteen," she said,

which was almost true — sorta. She did have a fake ID for clubbing that would back her up.

"Then you are indeed a candidate," he said, standing aside so that she could enter the temple. "My name is Sister Angela."

Her jaw stopped in midchew. "Sister — ?"

"I once was fortunate enough to avail myself of the church's services," Sister Angela said. A smile lit up the rough-hewn face. The expression was very nearly sweet in a gruesome sort of way, kind of like being smiled upon by a slaver pit bull. "They gave me a second chance at life."

"You're not going to give *my* body to some freaking guy, are you?" Charlsie demanded as the two of them walked back though the echoing nave to Sister Angela's office. Votive candles in tiny green glass holders were burning in the dim side alcoves and the flames bent double as they passed. The air positively reeked of bayberry. The whole effect was so retro, she couldn't believe it. "That would be just too...gross."

"Why should it concern you?" Sister Angela said, "since you wish to abandon it yourself?"

"How come you didn't get a female body?" Charlsie said. "How come they stuck you with — " She gestured at the ungainly male form. " — this?"

"I had cystic fibrosis," Sister Angela said. "I was dying from the moment I was born, so I was grateful for continuing life in whatever form it came."

"You should have gotten a refund, maybe even sued." Charlsie flounced through a door in the back of the church as directed, and then another to the left, finding herself in Sister Angela's poorly lit office. Books, mostly steamy historical romances, were piled on shelves, soap opera gossip magazines heaped in the corner next to a computer desk. The room smelled faintly of Chanel #5 and distant machinery vibrated beneath the floor.

"We don't charge for our services," the sister said. "We operate on donations. No one knows what form they will be given until they go through the process and then wake up on that blessed morning to take up their second life." She smiled broadly, revealing chipped teeth. "We feel that it's best to let God choose for us."

"Well, God sure enough must have been pissed at you," Charlsie said. Sister Angela's nose looked as though it had been broken any number of times. "Were you like a big-time sinner?"

"I think you're getting off the point," Sister Angela said, taking the chair behind a well-worn desk. Her hands were again folded, but her battered male face looked like it would like to take a swing at Charlsie. Old habits probably died hard. "You're certain you want to enroll in the Donation Guild?"

"Guild?" Charlsie said. "I don't want to join anything. I just want to give my body away so I can be like — at peace."

"In order to do that, you have to become an acolyte in the Guild," Sister Angela said. She opened a drawer and pulled out a handful of paper forms. "Just fill these out, then we'll go on from there."

**J**EEZE, CHARLSIE told herself as she struggled with the Application Essay, this was worse than applying for college. All she wanted to do was off herself in a way that would make those conceited skanks back at school really jealous. None of them would ever have the nerve to do what she was doing. That was for sure.

"Reason(s) for wishing to disincorporate?" the form asked.

Charlsie had never seen that word before, but obviously it meant "die." Why couldn't they just come out and say so? Were they trying to confuse her?

"Everything sucks," she wrote laboriously, then added, "And Everyone." Including the Church of Second Life, she thought rebelliously, but didn't write that.

"Hobbies?" the form asked.

She threw the pencil down and crossed her arms. Sister Angela looked up from her computer monitor. "Having trouble?"

"What does it matter if I have hobbies?" Charlsie said. "I'm trying to die here, not post a bio on MySpace or get a date for Prom."

"We find that the body retains muscle memory, after the original personality is wiped," Sister Angela said. "So it helps to have a file for the new owner. That way he or she knows if they might become a watercolor painter or a seamstress, a dancer or an excellent horsewoman."

"Oh." Chagrined, Charlsie picked up the pencil again and went back to the form. After "Hobbies?" she wrote "tattoo artist," "bungee jumping," and "sky diving." She'd never done anything of the sort, but she didn't see how it would hurt her body to give those a try after she was gone. It might as well go out and live a little. She certainly never had. Thanks, Dad, for seeing to that.

"Allergies?" the form asked.

"None," she wrote, though she was allergic to shellfish and strawberries. Let the next occupant find out the same way she had, by trial and error. No reason why they should have it any easier than a born person.

"Sexually active?"

"Very," she wrote, though she hadn't actually gotten around to the deed yet. She'd always meant to, though. Intentions counted. Everyone knew that.

Charlsie worked her way through the rest of the questions much faster thereafter. It was a lot easier, she found, if you just made the answers up, and by the end, she was pretty much enjoying herself, which hadn't happened for a while.

Sister Angela collected the papers and squared up the edges by tapping them on her desk. "Fine." The weathered male face beamed at her. "I'll have these entered into the computer and we'll see you tomorrow, same time."

"But —" Charlsie said. Her face heated. "I was counting on biting the big one today."

"Oh, we never proceed that quickly," Sister Angela said, taking Charlsie by the elbow. "The gift of a body to a dying person is sacred. We don't want anyone doing it on impulse."

"This is so totally screwed up!" Charlsie muttered to herself as she drove her clunker Tempo across town to another dreary pot roast dinner with the 'rents. A girl couldn't even off herself when she wanted. Just as she'd thought, everything in this so-called Vale of Tears really did suck.

After dinner, the pot roast lay in her stomach like lead. She didn't do her homework. She didn't pick up her discarded clothes, put away her clean laundry, or make any attempt to straighten her room. No point in



bothering with any of that stuff if you were planning on exiting forever tomorrow. Instead she watched old movies on the television in her bedroom until what her mother called "the wee hours." One, a black and white flick, *The Big Store*, starring three maniacs called The Marx Brothers, made her laugh until tears rolled down her face.

The next morning she slept in and let school go on without her. That ho' Krissi could lord about the halls all she wanted with her posse, which admittedly contained every one of Charlsie's former friends. She just snuggled under the covers until midmorning when hunger and Nature's call finally drove her out.

Mom and Dad always took her younger brothers to school on their way to work and left the house before she did, so they wouldn't have any idea that she'd stayed home. She stumbled into the gleaming stainless steel kitchen and reached for the Slim-Fast bars in the pantry, but then realized, if she were going to vacate this body, there was no reason to obsess about her weight anymore. So, instead, she breakfasted on Vanilla Fudge Ripple ice cream, two bowlsful in fact, then showered for twenty solid minutes with no one about to yell at her about emptying the hot water tank.

When it was time to go back to the temple, she dressed carefully in her favorite denim miniskort and a lacy teal tunic (the one her dad totally loathed), cut low to reveal assets which she really didn't have. That would soon be someone else's problem, she thought airily. She was moving to a higher plane where great boobs were no doubt issued as standard equipment.

At the temple, Sister Angela's ugly mug was waiting with someone else, a fragile old woman with flyaway white hair, haphazardly pinned up as though she employed a hyperactive two-year-old as a beautician. The Order's navy blue pants and shirt hung on her like grocery bags.

"Charlsie, it's good to see you again!" Sister Angela said.

"Jeez, you don't have to sound so surprised," Charlsie said, shivering in the spring air. She really should have worn her freaking jacket with the little mirror spangles, even if it didn't go with this outfit. "I said I would be here."

"Seventy-five to ninety percent of all initial applicants never return," the old woman said in a quavery voice. "Most people are impulse

applications who change their minds once they cool down and think the matter through."

"Charlsie, this is Father Andrew," Sister Angela said. "Our head priest."

"No way!" Charlsie said, her head reeling.

The two Second Lifers had persuaded her to come inside the temple to get out of the sharp wind. "It often affects people like that, my dear," the old man/woman said, patting her cheek with a withered hand. "It's a perfectly normal reaction — nothing to be ashamed of."

"Is this a perv hangout?" Charlsie sank onto a polished wooden pew and breathed in the scent of lemon oil. "You're going to hand my body over to some old fart?"

"We prefer the term 'seasoned soul,'" Sister Angela said. "And, remember, God does the selecting. Otherwise, we as imperfect humans might be inclined to play favorites. It's a bit like buying a lottery ticket. Some are big winners, others are just good for another ticket so you can play again, and some frankly are not much of a prize at all."

"'Tis a glorious thing to lay down your life for another," Father Andrew said in his piping old-lady voice, "just as Christ laid down his to redeem us all."

"Yeah, well Christ didn't have to think about some old geezer parading around in his body after he bit the big one, wearing his favorite hoodie or stuffing his bra."

"Charlsie, I'm sensing serious reticence here," Sister Angela said. "This choice may not be for you."

"You think?" Charlsie bolted onto her feet and gazed around the peaceful sanctuary. Somewhere in the background, machinery hummed. She could feel it vibrating up through the stone flag floor. "I don't know. I was really planning on like — you know — going."

Father Andrew's eyes were as beady as a bird's. "Why don't you participate in the Donation Guild for a few days, maybe even a few weeks, before you make up your mind? It could bring you a measure of peace, either way."

And, because she couldn't think of any alternatives, she found herself saying yes.

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Charlsie went back to school the next day, having already intercepted one call to her mother from the Principal's office, wanting to know if she was sick. She ignored Krissi and Amy and Madison who giggled and whispered and rolled their eyes as she walked by. They didn't matter. No one did. She had something else in her life now, something secret and important. None of those air-brains could say that.

And since she wasn't burdened with friends or a social life anymore, she found herself with a lot of time on her hands. When she wasn't working at the temple, she wound up doing some of her homework out of sheer unadulterated boredom. It was strange, but the more of it she did, the easier it got. Sometimes, now, she actually understood what the teacher was saying in class, even in Trig. It was a startling, rather heady feeling.

She did meet new people at the Second Life Temple, Phillip who was forty-one and miserable, having just lost his IT job — again, and Marsha, in her fifties, who was going through her third divorce and had this teensy problem with alcohol. There were Sherry and Alex and Roger and Stacey and Reg, each with his or her problems, just some of the many miserable souls haunting the dim hallways of the temple complex. Most were eager to share their stories, but she shied away from getting close. There was no point, because, like her, they were all on their way Out.

Each day, they met at the temple, then put on the navy blue robe of an acolyte and took care of the housekeeping chores in order to free up the priests for more important work. As time went by, they began instruction on how to tend the vast network of computers in the underground complex beneath the temple itself. This was where personalities of the dying were downloaded into the servers and where donated bodies had their suicidal personalities chemically wiped.

There was some disagreement, she learned, as to whether consciousness was actually transferred or merely duplicated. That was obviously a big deal to the supplicants, though it really didn't figure into her end of the situation.

Sometimes, Charlsie would get a glimpse of one of the dying when they applied for a new body. They came in droves, many more than the temple could serve. All of them met Sister Angela and Father Andrew, so

Charlsie supposed they understood the risk they were taking in this grab-bag style exchange.

The acolytes were not permitted to mingle with supplicants, though. Sister Angela said the church didn't want to influence potential donors unduly. If you wanted to lay down your body, you should do it for the right reason. Unlike some of the antiquated religions taught, the Church of Second Life didn't consider it a sin if you didn't want to live in this world anymore, but on the other hand, it was selfish to throw away a perfectly healthy body when so many desperately ill people could put it to good use.

It turned out that one of the acolytes, Phillip, was quite good at hacking computer files, having acquired a lot of experience during what he termed his "misspent youth." He'd already scanned the Second Life code and had a theory that the Church's prized random selection algorithm wasn't quite as random as it was supposed to be. The sexes got switched, he said, when matching new personalities to donated bodies rather more often than chance should indicate.

One night the acolytes all went out for pizza after their shifts and Phillip reported that he'd learned by reading supposedly secure files that Sister Angela's body had once been Bill "The Bomber" Atkins, a notorious prize fighter who'd killed three men in the ring. Father Andrew's bird-like form had been donated by Maria Selves, a famous anthropologist who had inadvertently wiped out an entire Amazonian culture by exposing them to the flu virus. Each had compelling reasons for wanting to leave the world behind, but it was getting harder each day for Charlsie to remember why she wanted to go.

At home, her detachment led to quieter evenings and less arguing with her two younger brothers. To explain where she went after school each day, she told the 'rents, Charles and Anna, that she had a part-time job down at Burger King. That kept them off her back, and they seemed to think she was finally becoming more responsible. What a laugh.

One day, though, about three weeks after Charlsie had enlisted in the Donation Guild, she had just ducked into the locker room to don her blue robe when her dad stuck his head through the door.

"Charlsie?" He stepped inside, still wearing his suit and red-striped tie from work, looking around, dark hair mussed, obviously aghast. "I

thought you were up to something, but I was hoping it was only drugs! What are you doing in this place?"

"I...work here," she said, her heart hammering.

"These people are notorious nut cases!" he said. "Everyone knows that! Get your stuff. We're going home!"

"I can't," she said, thrusting her arm into the blue robe's sleeve. "I have to work my shift. They're counting on me."

"You don't have a shift," he said, crossing the room to take her by the arm. "Not anymore!"

"Is there a problem?" Sister Angela's sturdy form appeared in the doorway.

"No, Sister," Charlsie said, freeing her arm. "He was just leaving."

"That's no *sister*!" her dad said.

"Inside, she is." Charlsie sighed. "Just go home, Dad. We can talk about this later."

Her dad whirled upon Sister Angela, hands fisted. "She's underage! I'll sue you people six ways from Sunday!"

"Charlsie?" Sister Angela said with a note of disapproval.

"I'm eighteen — almost," Charlsie said, her voice fading on the last word.

"I told you to get your stuff!" her dad said.

"No," she said, surprising herself. With trembling fingers, she buttoned up her robe. "Like it's my life and I can do what I want with it. And right now, what I want is to work my freaking shift!"

"These people will *kill* you!" he said. "They'll flush your personality out of your brain like yesterday's dead goldfish, then hand your body over to some stranger!"

"No, we won't," Sister Angela said, "not if she isn't of age." Her battered male face glanced at Charlsie.

Her father loosened his tie as though he was ready to go ten rounds with Sister Angela. "Well, she's not!"

The two men regarded one another. Her father had a temper, but he'd never been very physical. Charlsie bet Sister Angela could take him. "Just because I'm not of age doesn't mean I can't volunteer for the Donation Guild," she said. "I'm not breaking any rules by just working here, am I?"

"No," Sister Angela said quietly.

"I *am* old enough to drop out of school," Charlisie said, facing her father, "and I will, unless you let me keep my job!"

"No, you won't!" Her father seized her arm and dragged her out the door.

She gave up trying to get free and just rode in his gray van in thin-edged silence, huddled against the passenger door. There was peace at the temple, weird as that sounded. She liked working there, sweeping and polishing, hanging out with the other volunteers, entering data into the servers. She had the lowest error rate of all the new acolytes. Father Andrew said so. That meant something. She'd never been the best at anything before.

"It's a cult, Charlisie," her mother said that night after her little brothers, Eric and Tom, had been sent to their rooms. "There was an exposé on *Entertainment Tonight* just last week! In spite of what they claim, they don't save those sick people. The brain patterns are duplicated, not transferred. The original personality still dies."

"Besides," her father said, sweeping his arm around the living room with its home theater sound system, Mega-High-Def TV, and the latest in computer gaming technology, "why on Earth would you want to kill yourself? You have a loving home, a generous allowance, a bright future." He had a desperate gleam in his eye. "What could be so wrong with your life that you'd want to abandon it to some stranger?"

"We're signing you up for counseling," her mother said, "and you *will* go!"

"SO YOU WANT to kill yourself?" The shrink leaned forward in his chair, looking expectant. His fingers played with a cigarette lighter, flipping the top up and down, up and down. Dr. Fusselman was ferret-faced and fortyish, all edges with narrow dark eyes that followed her every move as though he were stalking her. His spacious blue-carpeted office had dumb fake trees scattered about like she was supposed to be fooled into thinking they were outdoors. He even played birdcalls on a sound system hidden in the wall somewhere.

Over by the window, fish swam in a huge tank, darting around submerged rocks over and over, looking trapped. The air reeked of carpet

cleaner. She'd been coming here two days a week for three weeks, the financial equivalent of a Florida vacation for the entire family, her mother reminded her at every opportunity.

"No, I don't want to die, not anymore." Charlise sighed because he started every session with the same stupid question. She examined her tangerine-polished fingernails. Who was taking her shift down at the temple? Sister Angela had promised to teach her how to download a supplicant's personality, which would have been awesome. Now, she'd never get to do it. "Will you just give it a freaking rest?"

"I can't help you if we don't get to the root of the problem," the shrink said. His bushy eyebrows quirked. His voice lowered. "Let's dig a little deeper today. I know you're hiding something. Have you ever been — abused?"

"Eeuw!" She sat up straight in her chair.

"Something drove you to that kind of desperation," the shrink said. "Are you having an affair with one of your teachers, or does someone come into your bedroom at night?" His eyes narrowed even further, which she hadn't thought possible. "Is it your father?"

"You are totally gross!" She bolted to her feet, then tottered a bit on the spike heels she'd worn to cheer herself up. "I can't do this anymore!"

"Charlsie, sit down," he said, as though disciplining a wayward dachshund.

She fled out his office door, past his goggle-eyed secretary, who looked a bit like a fish herself. There were even more fish in a tank in the waiting room, big splotchy ones with blubbery lips. This guy had a real thing for scales and fins, she thought as she snatched her jacket from the coat tree. He should get help.

Outside, she pulled off her shoes and then ran for a block, dodging pedestrians on the sidewalk, old ladies and young mothers with strollers, startled sparrows feasting on a dropped hot dog bun, a stray cat. She finally stopped with a stitch in her side beneath an old oak. Even though it was overcast and cold, sweat poured down her temples. She blotted her face on her jacket sleeve. This was all just too lame. Maybe she couldn't remember why she'd wanted to off herself in the first place, but new reasons were rapidly surfacing.

Her feet still hurt from wearing the tight shoes, but the sidewalk was

freaking cold, so she put her heels back on. Her father would drop by the office in half an hour to pick her up, and when he got there, the shrink was bound to rat on her. There would be more trouble at home. They might even try to send her to that stupid boarding school in Pennsylvania they'd been threatening. Things had been so much more peaceful when she was just quietly arranging her death. Too bad she hadn't succeeded.

A maroon city bus loomed at the end of the street and she realized she was close to the bus stop. On a whim, she dug in her purse for change. She had maybe an hour before her father caught up with her, just enough time to check in down at the temple and see how things were going these days.

Someone had been working in the gardens, she noticed as she walked up. Debris had been cleared, the earth readied for new beds of flowers in a few weeks, once it warmed up a bit. She saw a figure in the distance and hurried. Was it Sister Angela?

But when she got closer, she found it was Phillip, the IT guy, dressed in the navy shirt and trousers of the Order rather than an acolyte's robe. He was perched on a stepladder, patiently cleaning a stained glass window portraying the downloading of an ecstatic personality. "What's up?" she said from below.

He looked down. "Sorry?" There was no sign of recognition in his gaze.

"Dude, I know I've been gone," she said, "but it hasn't been that long. Found out any more goodies about Sister Angela's past?"

"I — think you must have known my — body — before," he said, climbing back down the ladder. His movements were awkward and he fumbled at the rungs. "I haven't been — myself — very long."

His affect was entirely changed. It was like he was shorter, rounder, even younger. He regarded her with zero recognition. Phillip had donated, she realized suddenly. A chill swept over her. This was someone else entirely looking out through his hazel eyes.

"My name is Brother Shawn," he said, putting down his Windex bottle and roll of paper towels. He wiped his hands on his pants, then held one out. "My parents have moved out of state and I don't know if I want to live with them anymore, so for now I've joined the Order."

She shook his hand with a sense of numbness. Phillip was gone. The



two of them would never dig through the files for confidential information again or go out for a late snack with the other acolytes. Anger surged through her. She'd known better than to make friends here, but then she'd gone ahead and done it anyway. Spaz-brain!

"I had leukemia," Brother Shawn was saying, "since I was six. None of the therapies worked and believe me, we tried them all. I had chemo, radiation, and then a bone marrow transplant. I would get better, but then it kept coming back. In the end, the doctors said I had two months, maybe less, when my parents finally let me come here."

"How old are — were — you?" she asked.

"Fourteen," he said. "This — " He waved a hand at his pudgy forty-year-old body. " — well, it's going to take some getting used to. It creeps me out seeing this old dude's face staring back from the mirror. I mean — look at me! He didn't take very good care of himself."

*One leaves, one stays*, she thought. That was the Order's creed. The impact of its meaning swept over her. Offing yourself was for-freaking-ever. Somehow, she hadn't quite processed that before.

"Just keep telling yourself 'Each day is a gift,'" Sister Angela's rumbling voice intoned from behind. "You'll soon settle in. Welcome back, Charlsie."

"I can't stay," Charlsie said, turning. "My dad is bound to catch up with me. I just slipped away to see how things were here."

"Proceeding normally," Sister Angela said. Her heavy boxer-arm draped over Brother Shawn's new shoulder. "Phillip declared himself ready to go last week and we concurred. After processing, we presented his body and then the random selection algorithm downloaded Shawn."

"I've been waiting three years," Shawn said, "though inside the computer, you can't tell it's taking that long. One minute, you're puking your guts out, afraid to share air space with anyone because your immune system's flat-lined, and the next, you're in a new body." He smiled shakily and regarded his spread fingers. "The good thing is that, even though this one has some serious miles on it, nothing hurts anymore. I can go roller blading again, maybe even try snow boarding and surfing."

"God knew when the time was right for you to take up new flesh," Sister Angela said. "He picks better than we ever could for ourselves."

A familiar gray van screeched up in the parking lot. Doors slammed. Voices shouted in the distance. Charlsie glanced over her shoulder. It

looked like both her dad and the shrink were hot-footing it through the church parking lot. Abso-freakingly great.

"Charlsie, get away from those lunatics!" her dad yelled, waving his arms frantically.

"Guess I have to go," she told Sister Angela. She glanced at Brother Shawn's shy smile trying to plaster itself on Phillip's older face with mixed results. "I was never really going to do it, though. I see that now."

"That was pretty much understood," Sister Angela said. "Most people your age don't really want to lay down their body when they come to us. They're just confused and unhappy. They need a chance to think, a kind of cooling off period."

"I'd still like to volunteer though," she said.

Footsteps were pounding closer.

"The work is hard," Sister Angela said. She rasped her fingers over her five o'clock shadow thoughtfully. "Everyone who comes to us is in pain, either physical or mental. The people with whom we work closest often choose to leave this world and it's always difficult to see them go. Phillip was very dear. In fact, he delayed his departure several days because he insisted on completing the scheduled maintenance on all our servers before he left us. I will miss him."

"I'll sue you within an inch of your sorry lives!" her father was yelling. Dr. Fusselman, the shrink, lurched along in his wake, breathing hard, evidently not in nearly as good physical condition, which wasn't saying much. Her dad had never been one for working out.

Brother Shawn glanced at the approaching men, his brows raised. "What — ?"

"Don't ask, dude," Charlsie said. She rolled her eyes. "Believe me, you don't want to know."

Her father rounded the last empty flower bed. "You can't — you can't — " He wrenched at his tie, then leaned over and braced his hands on his thighs, fighting for breath.

"Need to hit the gym once in a while, Dad?" she said.

"I — told you — to stay away from this place!" he said in explosive spurts, his face red.

"I'm not doing anything wrong," she said. "I just came to see my friends."

Tottering up on spaghetti legs, Dr. Fusselman propped himself against the stone wall of the temple. His head drooped back, his eyes closed. His suit jacket hung open and she could see his heaving paunch. "These people are not your friends!" he said, looking like he might barf. She moved prudently out of range. He shook his head. "They just want to take advantage of you!"

"At least *they* don't freaking charge money while they're doing it!" she said. "You know, if I have to look at those stupid fish one more time, I *will* off myself!"

"Charlsie!" Her father seized her arm.

She jerked away. "I got over it, you know, wanting to bite the big one. It was just one bad day, weeks ago, but you keep throwing it in my face!" She glared at her dad and the shrink. "Now, you've got me thinking again that leaving might not be such a bad idea after all!"

"This is your fault!" Her father turned upon Brother Shawn.

The new Brother backed away, knocking over the Windex bottle. The roll of paper towels unwound down the sidewalk.

"Stop it! You're scaring him!" Charlsie said. "He hasn't done anything wrong."

"This whole thing is a sick, sick scam!" her father said. "I'm going to see that these perverts are put out of business!"

"Hel-lo? This is a *church*," Charlsie said. "You can't just make religion go away because you don't like it!"

Sister Angela cocked her head, studying his florid face. "Many lay people do not agree with what we offer, but I sense that this is something more," she said softly. "You told us that Charlsie was underage, so you know we can't accept her. Why does what we do here still frighten you so much?"

Dad grabbed for Charlsie's arm again, but she backed out of reach. "Answer the question, Dad," she said.

He stared at her, wordless.

There was something in his eyes, something terrified. She suddenly remembered how easily he'd found her in the locker room even though it was in the back of the temple. He'd gone straight to it. No one had shown him the way. "You've been here before," Charlsie said.

"I — " His overheated face paled.

Dr. Fusselman turned to look at her dad. "Charles?" he said.

"It had to have been before my time, and I've been here eleven years," Sister Angela said. "I don't recognize you."

"I do," Father Andrew's chirping old-lady voice said.

"You can't have her!" her father cried, then seized Charlise and pulled her to his chest. He was holding her too tight, and she could feel his heart beating wildly beneath her cheek.

"Charlise wasn't eligible," Father Andrew said. "You, better than anyone, should know that. We take only those of sound mind and legal age who are determined to leave this world, and even for those we provide time to change their minds."

Charlise turned in his arms and looked up at his panicked face, trying to put the pieces together. "Dad, did you try to donate when you were my age?"

"Actually, he's an upload," Father Andrew said, "one of our earliest, and a great success too. Our failure rate was much higher then. We were much encouraged by his, or should I say her, case." The old-lady face smiled gently. "We haven't heard from you since the day you walked out of the temple, Charlene. Have you had a good life?"

"You don't understand," her father said. "When people know, everyone looks at you like you're a freak, like you cheated somehow and have no right to be walking around." He gazed over Charlise's shoulder at the temple. "They say you're not real, just a copy of someone who died. Even my own parents couldn't deal with it. They buried my old body and refused to see me. I had to leave home at nineteen, start all over again, become someone totally new." He shuddered. "The thought of seeing another person walking around in Charlise's body —"

Light began to creep in around the tattered edges of Charlise's brain. *Charlene*. So her old dad was sugar-and-spice on the inside, pink instead of blue. The stupid grab-bag effect again. These people really should do something about that random assignment thing. "Does Mom know?" she asked.

"No." His (her?) voice was a strangled whisper. "I was afraid, even if you just worked here, you would come across my name in the records, that you'd learn what I was."

She thought of Phillip cheerfully hacking into restricted files. The parental unit had a point. Sooner or later she'd have probably found out.

"Charles, it's obvious you still have a number of unresolved issues," Dr. Fusselman said. He brushed at his disordered hair, then pulled out a PDA and activated it. "No wonder Charlsie was at risk. I think this calls for family therapy sessions, maybe three times a week?"

"Oh, get real!" Charlsie said, freeing herself. "Nobody wants you here. Whatever's wrong, we'll fix it ourselves! Go back to your freaking office and feed those lame fish."

"But —" The shrink's mouth gaped in a credible imitation of a dying flounder. "If we're dealing with gender reassignment on top of everything else, we should definitely get to the bottom of this."

Her father flushed. "I don't want to be a 'this,' anymore!" His hands were fists. "Just — send me a final bill."

Fusselman buttoned his pinstriped suit jacket, though he missed a button and got it crooked, then set out for the parking lot. Charlsie watched him go with a sense of relief.

"Brother Shawn," Sister Angela said, "I think the windows on the south side of the church need your attention."

"Oh, yeah, like sure thing, Sister." He collected the Windex and paper towels and headed around the side of the temple.

Charlsie shivered as the spring wind gusted. "Come inside, both of you," Father Andrew said. "It's cold out here."

For a second, Charlsie thought her father would bolt. His eyes were fearful, his expression haggard, like he'd stayed up night after night worrying about just this.

"No matter what anyone said, you didn't do anything wrong," Sister Angela said. "The person who donated your body no longer wanted to live. It was a sacred gift."

Her dad hunched his head, as though expecting a blow, then darted into the shadowy church. Inside, light flooded down through the stained glass windows so that red, green, blue, and gold danced like living jewels on the flagstone floor. "They're not even — my kids," he said brokenly, sinking into the nearest gleaming pew, "Eric, Tom, and Charlsie. They came from *this* body. I have no right to them. They belong to *him*, whoever he was."

"Then that's how you've honored your donor." Sister Angela's rugged form knelt before her dad, staring up into his stressed-out face.

Father Andrew nodded. "One Leaves, One Stays," he said in his high quavery voice. "He didn't have the strength to face the future, but you did, Charlene. You created a family and brought three children into the world. That's a marvelous legacy."

"Jeez, do you think you can get out of being my dad that easily?" Charlsie said. "Like I know I can be a pain, but —!"

"I was afraid some part of you knew all along," he said. "I thought what I did all those years ago led you to the temple, that maybe you even inherited the desire to commit suicide from this body. It was all my fault."

"You decided to live," she said, "when you could have given up and died." She thought back on her reasons for coming here. They seemed vague and unimportant now, like thoughts some other person had been thinking, and a very silly one at that. "This is a good place. They do good things for people."

"Only two percent of those who initially approach the Church of Second Life ever donate their bodies," Sister Angela said. "That's a much lower percentage of deaths for our contacts than suicide prevention hot lines report, and those who are determined to go help someone in desperate need by their passing."

"It's the ultimate in recycling," Charlsie said. "How can that be bad? Reduce, reuse, and all that! You saved a perfectly good body from going to waste."

Father Andrew patted her dad on the shoulder. "Charlene, I think it would do you some good to volunteer in the Donation Guild," he said. "If you experience the work we do, perhaps then you could make peace with yourself."

"Call me Charles, please," her dad said. "Things are complicated enough. I haven't been Charlene for years."

"You know," Charlsie said, "like we could be a father and daughter team, working here together." She glanced up at Sister Angela and Father Andrew. "And I still want to learn how to download personalities. Sister Angela promised!"

Father Andrew looked her dad in the eyes. "Charles?"

Dad sighed, staring down at his clenched hands, and for a stomach-wrenching moment, she thought he was going to refuse. Things would go back to the way they'd been, boring and stupid and pointless. She'd been

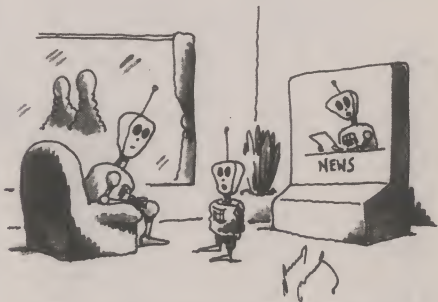
clueless to think it could be any different. Old dogs couldn't learn new tricks, even ones walking around in someone else's discarded body. Everyone, it seemed, but her knew that.

"All — right," her dad said as though he had to force the words out. "I'll — give it a try."

"Awesome!" Charlise said and threw her arms around his/her neck. In her mind, she was already planning the weeks to come. They would sweep the flagstones together, polish the pews, wash windows, enter data, and download applicants into the computers to give them another chance at life. Maybe she could even learn to upload personalities into newly donated bodies. That would be creepy and fascinating all at the same time.

And, now that she really understood where her father was coming from, she might even be able to persuade Dad-Charlene to go to the mall with her. They could bond big-time while picking out earrings and cosmetics. What did it matter if no one at school would speak to her? She and her Dad would be homegirls forever.

That would totally rock. ☺



*"Tell me what it was like before the Microsoft Mutiny, Dad."*



# FILMS

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## KATHI MAIO

### NO GAYDAR REQUIRED

I RECENTLY re-watched *The Celluloid Closet*, a documentary co-written (with Sharon Wood) and directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman from the writings of Vito Russo. The film, which first appeared in 1995, was released on DVD in 2001. Packed with lots of intriguing clips, as well as interviews with stars, writers, producers, directors, and social critics, the film details very well the troubled history of the homosexual character in Hollywood films.

For me, the saddest thing about watching *The Celluloid Closet* is not revisiting images of the pathetic "sissies" of the fifties, or the gay monsters and victims of the movies of the seventies and eighties. Nor is it being reminded of all the gay characters and content that have been rewritten as

straight or edited out of feature films over the last hundred years. For me, the most depressing thing about the documentary was its deliberately upbeat ending which managed to imply that things were changing, strides toward equality in cultural depictions were being made, and that we were on the brink of seeing gay characters more fully integrated into major motion pictures.

Perhaps in 1995 they had good reasons to be hopeful, but here in the end of 2007, I don't see a lot of cinematic diversity: not for people of color, and certainly not for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people.

Outside of the fairly frequent use of gays as minor support characters (who are identified as homosexual but appear to be celibate, and exist only to provide a sympathetic ear or buffoonish comic relief),



major-studio mall-cineplex Hollywood films are not substantively better than they were seventeen years ago. (If the last "gay" movie you saw on the local marquee was the Adam Sandler straight--guys-in-a-benefits-scam comedy, *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*, you know what I mean.)

You could argue that the small screen has done a better job than the big screen. Without a doubt, premium cable channels have made strides. On the traditional networks, the picture is less rosy. Certainly in campy comedies like the ABC telenovela, *Ugly Betty*, gay and transgendered characters are an essential part of the mix. Are the gay characters neurotic and ridiculous? Usually. But no more so than the wacky straights in the series. Comedy (like fantasy) makes things safer, of course. And television allows the offended viewer to flip the channel. And yet, even on network TV, gay characters are few and far between — and in each of the last few years they have actually decreased in numbers, as a yearly analysis by GLAAD has documented. (The end of *Will & Grace* really put a dent in the gay TV populace!)

But Hollywood movies are even more resistant to change. Is it because they live in fear of their

perceived key demographic — the straight, white, adolescent male? Is it because of the massive investment and elusive payback of people willing to invest ten dollars cash for a ticket or twenty-five dollars for a DVD?

You may be asking yourself: "Why has the bloody woman gone off on this singularly inappropriate rant?" If so, Gentle Reader, let me explain. The reason I am ruminating on filmic gay invisibility is because I have just come back from a screening of the film, *Martian Child*, which was adapted from a very autobiographical novelet and novel by David Gerrold.

For those of you more familiar with Mr. Gerrold's *Star Trek* work and the *War Against the Chtorr* series than with the title in question, this particular work is a roman à clef about the adoption process. It details a couple of years in the life of the author, as he built a family with an abused and neglected young boy he rescued from years in the foster care system. He went through this process as a single father and a gay man.

With an eye toward full disclosure, let me remind you that the original story first appeared in these pages in September of 1994. After finding it difficult to place his single

father adoption story about a little lad who self-identifies as a Martian, the author found an eventual home for it through the good judgment of our former editor, Kristine Kathryn Rusch. (What can I say, all of our editors and publishers have always shown impeccable taste!) The rest, as they say, is history. The story went on to win the Nebula, the Hugo, and the Locus Award.

Mr. Gerrold later expanded the story into a full-length novel. And when you read both versions of the story, it is interesting how the author added depth and human drama to his tale of the difficult bonding process between "David" and little Dennis. The fear and disquiet of a new parent dealing with a troubled eight-year-old who had already seen too much of the negative attributes of the human adult world is keenly felt and clearly documented. He expands the details of both the tenderness and turmoil of the relationship. And he weaves throughout his very realistic story/memoir the fictional elements of a gnawing fear: If a child says he is Martian implanted into a human host, what if he is telling the truth?

Among the other aspects to the story the author further elucidates upon and makes completely unambiguous is his identity as a gay

man. This open acknowledgment adds much to the story. It adds to the protagonist's fear that he will be judged not "good enough" to be a father. And it also adds to the profound connection he feels with his new son, who has been so imprinted with a sense of being alien and "other" in society, that he can only explain it away by identifying himself as a creature from another world.

It's a poignant story, to be sure. Heart-warming, dramatic—it even includes the Northridge earthquake!—and with just enough of a tease of spooky fantasy elements (especially coming from this author) to add another layer to the story-telling. How could such a tale not be adapted for the screen?

And so it was. After the normal amount of time in development hell, *Martian Child* finally made it to theaters, adapted by screenwriting partners Seth E. Bass (*Twilight of the Golds*) and Jonathan Tolins (*Twilight of the Golds, Queer as Folk*), with an assist from director Menno Meyjes (*The Color Purple, Max*).

As an intimate family drama, the film rests heavily on the shoulders of its two central characters. In the case of new father, David, it is well-served by the casting of John

Cusack in the role. Cusack has never been particularly handsome or dashing. And as he slouches toward middle-age, he is even less so. But like Tom Hanks, he has always possessed a regular joe quality — albeit with a bit more of an alienated edge than dear Tom can manage — that makes him believable in the role of a straight widower who is drawn to adopt.

In the difficult role of the troubled young boy, the film was even more lucky. Young Bobby Coleman shows all the intuitive natural acting chops that we so often see in children who have not yet been ruined by the sophistication of show biz. In addition, with his big eyes, raspy voice, and unusual verbal cadence, he does have the eerie affect of a changeling. Throw a heavy coating of sunblock on his face — as a Martian, he fears the Earthly rays of the sun — and you definitely get the sense of a ghostly extraterrestrial who may simply be a frightened and unhappy little boy.

To add a dose of parental caution and common sense, the cast includes Joan Cusack in the not-exactly-a-stretch role of David's sister. But nepotism be damned! Joan Cusack is a national treasure and she is always so much fun to watch on

screen that I am always happy when she is in one of her brother's movies. Or any other, for that matter.

Less effective are Oliver Platt as David's literary agent, and Anjelica Huston as his publisher. Their roles are underwritten and seem to exist on screen only to provide (not very funny) comic relief and to play the bad guys in the movie's semi-heavy-handed message. To wit, even adult writers are pushed to conform and be what other, more powerful people want them to be.

I enjoyed the fact that the filmmakers tied in the author's science fiction background. David is shown visiting the set of a rather cheesy adaptation of his "Dracoban" interplanetary war novel and he is under constant pressure by his agent and publisher to deliver the sequel. Gerrold's story and book have many more self-referential asides and inside jokes for the sf fan to enjoy, but more in the movie would not have been practical.

I do, however, wish that the film had made more of the growing anxiety of the new dad regarding the possible alien origins of his new son. Despite the fact that little Dennis seems to be able to "Martian wish" a lackluster baseball team into getting a home run or a red

traffic light into turning prematurely green, you never really get the sense that Cusack's David fears that the little boy might *really* be from Mars. He doesn't talk to friends, comb through his journals, or make plaintive queries in internet forums looking for evidence of Martian children. And it is this content that specifically introduces a possible sf (that is, fictional) element to a story that is otherwise simply a heartwarming memoir.

And what's with teaching a little boy that you have unconditional love for him by encouraging him to trash your house and smear you with condiments? Although this scene is one of the more dramatic moments in the movie, I can't say that I found it particularly believable. As Gerrold's novel aptly illustrates, troubled children find defiance and destruction very easy, indeed. (It's self-control and a concerned empathy for others and their property with which they often struggle.) The final big emotional climax was also more overwrought than it needed to be, replete with dark shadows, flashing helicopter lights, and a somewhat labored string-ridden score.

As wonderful as it is to see a movie (any movie!) about the growing love between an adult and child

as they struggle to make a family and forge a parent-child bond, I must admit that *Martian Child* often felt like it had been made for Lifetime Television or as one of the better holiday installments of the Hallmark Hall of Fame. (Not that there's anything wrong with that, as the *Seinfeld* cast might have said.) The film didn't always have the substance and/or entertainment value that we would expect in a feature film, despite the lovely performances by Bobby Coleman and John Cusack.

But as my lead rant would suggest, my biggest disappointment is the film's cowardice in not bringing David's gayness into the story. You might ask, Gentle Reader, why it matters whether they portray David as gay. To that, my first response is, if it doesn't matter, why not allow him to be what he is?

Moreover, don't we need to see gay characters in stories that aren't *about* their homosexuality, but simply about their humanity? Don't gay characters deserve to be fully visible, wholly sympathetic, and the stars of their own life stories?

Do we need to rewrite them as straight and then bring in Amanda Peet to play the dead wife's best friend turned bohemian love interest? Believe me, Amanda Peet is a

very agreeable film presence, and her Harlie (there's one inside joke, anyway!) isn't objectionable in any way. Except that she's a beard.

I've heard that David Gerrold is generally pleased with the adaptation of his fictionalized memoir. And in an entry I spotted in his blog, he seems unfazed by the change, observing that "straight men can be just as good at being dads as gay men." Good point. The thing is everyone knows that straight men can be good fathers. (Just think of all the heartwarming straight single dads you've seen in the culture, from oldies like Andy Griffith to Steve Carell's recent devoted papa and lovelorn widower in *Dan in Real Life*.) But does everyone also know that gay men can be phenomenal, loving dads?

I'd like to think so, but I live in the bluest state, Massachusetts — the only one that allows gay people to actually marry. And I can testify that even in Massachusetts there are plenty of people who have very rigid definitions of family and marriage, and who still too easily confuse homosexuality with pedophilia. These are the people who need to see positive images of a gay father and his son.

Still, I grant you, if John Cusack's David had been depicted as gay those people wouldn't have gone near the movie. But other people, including gay people still hungry to see themselves portrayed as positive loving parents, or as the brave space heroes in an episode of *Star Trek*, those people would have gone to see the movie and would have rejoiced.

The same week that I went to see the screening of *Martian Child*, J. K. Rowling made the offhand admission at a speaking gig that she always thought Dumbledore was gay. I was happy to hear it. I was less happy to hear that fine upstanding citizen groups thereafter demanded — not for the first time — that the Potter books be pulled from library shelves. Nor did I enjoy hearing Bill O'Reilly blast Rowling for being a "provocateur" performing an "indoctrination thing" aimed at the public. He was, it appears, outraged that she might be inciting the public toward feelings of "tolerance" and "parity."

Parity! Tolerance! That does sound dangerous! I only wish *Martian Child* could have delivered that kind of a truth-telling "indoctrination thing" to the multiplex.



*Richard Paul Russo has published half a dozen stories in our pages over the past twenty years, including "Watching Lear Dream" (July 1999) and "Tropical Nights at the Natatorium" (Sept. 2003). His novels include Subterranean Gallery, Ship of Fools, and three hardboiled SF novels, Destroying Angel, Carlucci's Edge, and Carlucci's Heart. He's currently working on a sequel to Ship of Fools, but he found time to write this dark and phantasmagoric new story.*

# The Second Descent

*By Richard Paul Russo*

*For Sirius*



COLD DENSE FOG LAY HEAVY on the mountain that morning. Rafael stood in the snow outside his tent and searched for the summit, which was only three or four hundred meters above them, but he could see nothing through the diffuse gray fog that hissed and crystallized into particles of ice, a kind of snowy mistfall.

Morning rituals would soon be underway: lighting the stove, melting snow for water, eating nutrition bars, taking down and packing the tents and sleeping bags and other equipment. For now, though, Rafael relished the few moments of quiet before the others awakened.

They had numbered seven, but were now only four — three were lost the day the summit had been reached. Fortunately, the priest was one of the four survivors, for it was quite possible he would again be needed.

Rafael turned toward the mist-shrouded east and regarded the two barely visible, roughly heaped mounds of snow, the three makeshift

crosses. Mina had never been found, but they couldn't search any longer. Too much altitude, and no more oxygen. They needed to start down the mountain today.

Within the hour, the second descent would begin.

Rafael remembers almost nothing of the first descent. Hazy images and vague feelings. Several deaths. Iliana says she remembers every detail...and wishes she could forget every single one. She refuses to talk about it. Rafael thinks she may be lying, that she doesn't remember any more than he does.

He doesn't understand why they're engaged in a *second* descent, or how it's even possible. As far as he knows, they only climbed the mountain once. He thinks that if he *could* remember the first descent, he would understand everything.

As they started down, Rafael glanced back at what they were leaving behind: used oxygen bottles, shredded plastic of various colors, broken tent skeletons, a tattered prayer wheel and other detritus, much of it from previous summit attempts; two bodies and three crosses. Not the first bodies to be left behind on this mountain, nor would they be the last.

The morning was uneventful. The sun broke through the mist and they strapped on their polarized goggles. They roped up to cross the Bernoulli Ice Field, a smooth and gently curved expanse that steepened and fell away on either side. A steady and deliberate pace, not technically difficult, but tedious. They completed the crossing by early afternoon, then stopped for a meal and rest before starting down the jagged stretch of crumbling rock and ice that would occupy the rest of their day and eventually bring them to a sheltered plateau.

Hardly anyone spoke as they ate. Rafael sat next to Iliana, who soon got up and sat by herself twenty meters from the others. Yusuf took her place and said, "It is not personal with her." A ragged wound on the lean Egyptian's cheek was dark around the edges, and had shown no sign of healing over the past week.

"I know," Rafael answered, although he didn't. For him, everything was personal, while for Yusuf nothing ever seemed to be. He looked into Yusuf's shining brown eyes and imagined he saw distances greater than

either of them had ever traveled, and a thousand dead souls still on their final journeys. Rafael turned away.

Rafael isn't completely certain he reached the summit. He doesn't know if his uncertainty and confusion are a result of oxygen deprivation or of something else. He knows that some did not even make the attempt, and for those who did make the final push, everyone was on their own — each awakened as he or she could, each melted snow and drank and ate or not as they chose, each left at whatever time they could manage.

Near the top, every step seemed impossibly difficult, and often minutes passed between each one. While still climbing he saw Yusuf stumble past him on his way back down, a lopsided grin of success frozen onto his face.

Rafael stopped climbing at some point, and after a few minutes of standing and swaying on top of the world, nearly falling toward the distant curving horizon of stunning white ice and clouds and blue sky and black rock, he started back down. But he still isn't certain it was the summit, isn't certain that it was anything more than the highest point he was capable of climbing.

On his own staggering return to high camp he passed Mina, who was still working her way up around the col, and he remembers thinking there wasn't much light left, and she was too far from the summit. He'd been incapable of saying or doing anything other than continuing down. He left her behind and never saw her again.

Two nights later, Rafael stood with Iliana and Father Dominic on an icy ledge and searched for the lights of Kuma-Shan on the mountain below them. The night was cold and clear, but there were no signs of the city: no flickering orange of the torch-lit towers, no shining reflections of the palace's adamantine dome, no arcing trails of air vehicles.

"We should be able to see it by now," the priest said.

Iliana snorted. "What does it matter? We'll never enter the city, we'll never even reach the gates."

The priest shrugged. He dug around in his parka and came up with a cigarette and lighter. He lit the cigarette and coughed, and Iliana just shook her head.



"Did we see it on the first descent?" Rafael asked. He can't remember, can't remember if they *should* have seen it.

Father Dominic continued smoking, giving no indication he'd heard the question. Iliana looked at Rafael, her gaze steady, eyes lit by the stars and the glow of the priest's cigarette. "You know better than to ask that," she told him.

No I don't, Rafael thought, but he didn't say it.

Rafael has a wife and a six-year-old daughter back home, though he isn't always certain of that. Their names are Kiyoko and Leila, but their faces are vague in his memory, he has difficulty recalling their images in much detail. He hasn't seen them in months, hasn't had any contact with them in all that time. At times he wonders if they're still waiting for him, and at other times he feels certain that they will wait the rest of their lives, even if he never returns.

"Who were you talking to up on the ridge?" Iliana asked. A frown of concern tightened her forehead.

"Yusuf," Rafael answered, confused. "Who else could it have been?"

The frown changed to a hard and steady gaze. "Yusuf is dead."

Her words made no sense to him. "Dead?"

"Dead. You don't remember? He died on the first descent. Dropped into a crevasse when we weren't roped up. All we were able to recover was his ice axe."

Rafael sat on the edge of a black boulder. Her words rang true, and a brief, sharp image rose before him, a narrow jagged opening and blue ice turning darker until it finally became black.

"You're using his ice axe now," Iliana added. "You lost yours."

Rafael looked down at the ice axe hanging from his belt and gripped it with his gloved hand. There was nothing unusual in its feel; he'd expected some strange warmth, or an electric shock, or perhaps Yusuf appearing before him once more. He looked up at Iliana.

"But you *were* talking to Yusuf," she said.

"Yes."

She nodded. "Let's go. We need to reach Camp Seven and the cache before dark."

\*\*\*

The next night they looked down on the lights of Kuma-Shan, knowing that none of them would ever walk through any of the city's arched and torch-lit gates, never walk along the streets of painted stone with open metal vehicles hovering in the air along with the pulsing dragon lamps and the sparkling crimson message streamers. The smells of grilling spiced meats and mulled wine and tendriling incense wafted within those walls, denied to them as was the warmth of hearth fires and heated beds and the company of men and women who seemed to come from other times — the future and the past — as well as from other places. The city itself appeared to have materialized from some other reality.

Perhaps none of that was true, perhaps the stories told on the mountain were fabrications or fevered imaginings or simply the confused perceptions of those miraculous few who had somehow gained entrance and survived their evictions. Yet what little they could see from their vantage point — the colored lights moving through the air in beautiful complex patterns, the water spray at the tops of enormous fountains, the candle-lit windows — gave every indication that the stories were accurate, that Kuma-Shan was everything it was fabled to be.

Iliana turned away from the lights and trudged toward the tents, leaving Rafael and the priest alone.

"Can't we try to enter?" Rafael asked.

"We can try," answered the priest, "and we *will* try." He glanced at the glowing tip of his cigarette. "But we won't succeed. We won't get within hailing distance of the gates."

"Why not?"

"Ask Yusuf — he knows."

"Iliana says Yusuf is dead."

Father Dominic nodded. "So he is. Which is why he knows."

In that other life, the one he leads when he is not on this mountain or some other, Rafael is a labor lawyer. He represents unions negotiating contracts or making strike decisions, workers with grievances. The satisfaction he derives from his work — from aiding those who too often have been exploited when they did not have the support of unions or attorneys or even their fellow workers — more than makes up for the

substantially lower income he earns. As a corporate attorney, he could easily make two or three times as much money.

When at the end of a long day he comes home to the small house in the working class neighborhood, waves to his neighbors, climbs the porch and enters his home, then kisses and hugs his wife and daughter, he realizes he has all he needs and more, and appreciates how fortunate he truly is.



**A** SNOWSTORM RAGED for two days, confining them to their tents with its howling winds and ice that nearly buried them. Rafael still shared the tent with Yusuf, but didn't speak to him now. When the storm finally ceased and the climbers dug their way out of the tents, the early morning sun shone brilliantly across the fresh snow with blinding silver and blue incandescence. Squinting against the glare, they found that Kuma-Shan now stood *above* them on the mountain.

The city took on a different appearance in the daylight, but was no less inviting. The sun reflected off stained glass, bright multicolored banners snapped in the breeze, and the gleaming metal of satellite dishes rotated in slow, changing patterns atop the stone towers.

Kuma-Shan appeared to be no more than a half day's climb around a jagged serac and along a wide series of ledges. They all agreed to put the descent on hold and make for the city.

Everything went smoothly until they traversed one section of a ledge where the overhanging rock hid the city from view. When they emerged into the open and looked at Kuma-Shan, the city was farther away from them than it had been in the morning when they'd started.

They tried once more. They resumed their climb, doing everything they could to keep the city in sight, getting steadily closer to its gates, but at midafternoon they were forced once again to scramble across a stretch of loose rock beneath a dark outcropping that blocked their view of the city. When they saw Kuma-Shan again, it was, if anything, even farther up the mountain from them than ever.

They didn't even need to discuss the matter. By mutual silent agreement, the three climbers turned around and headed back down the mountain.

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Rafael sits in a green plastic chair and watches his family in the backyard garden. A clear day, late spring, sun high and hot. In baggy shorts and hiking boots and a gray sweatshirt with the sleeves cut off, Kiyoko stands with a claw tool in her right hand, contemplating the bed she has just finished weeding. Columbines in sprays of blue and white, yellow and white, and purple and white frame her. The sun casts her shadow across the ragged stone wall.

On the small patch of grass, Leila squats beside a large potted cala, focused intently on a shiny blue-black beetle scuttling across the dirt. Cyrus — sixty-five pounds of golden lab and pit bull — lies at Rafael's feet, *across* his feet and against his shins as though holding him in place; the dog's eyes are closed and he sighs loudly, an almost human sound. Rafael raises a cold bottle of beer to his mouth and drinks deeply, sets it on the stump beside him. He is as content as he has ever been.

That night, in the tent, Rafael asked Yusuf, "Why is it that we can't ever reach Kuma-Shan?"

Rafael could just make out Yusuf's eyes in the moonlight that filtered through the nylon dome. Eyes that stared at him with a surprising intensity.

"Why do you ask *me*?" Yusuf said.

"Father Dominic said I should."

"The priest." A slight shake of the head. "Why does he think I would know?"

"Because....," Rafael began. He stopped. Was it possible that Yusuf didn't know he was dead? What would happen if Rafael told him?

"I don't know," Rafael finally said. "He seemed to think you knew more about it than anyone else."

"Why?" Yusuf asked again, his gaze even more intense.

Rafael couldn't answer.

"How can you keep going up into those damn mountains?" Kiyoko asks.

This isn't the first time she's asked that question, but Rafael senses a pointed anguish in her voice, a certain desperate pleading. He is leaving

the next morning, and they lie side by side in bed, the window open, the unusually warm air humid and oppressive.

"Risking your life," she adds. "Risking our lives. You're not alone anymore, you haven't been for years. What about me? What about Leila?"

Sitting on bare rock warmed by the sun and looking down on all the snow and ice and jagged rock that stretches out below them, Rafael can still hear Kiyoko's words so clearly, the anger and pain and incomprehension. He can still see the tears, and his heart aches for her, for Leila, and for himself.

All those reasons he's given her over the years...he realizes now that they are nothing but excuses, and weak excuses at that. Excuses that hide some unidentified discontent that is in fact nothing more than a deep-seated selfishness.

He hopes this realization hasn't come too late.

A vast network of jagged unbridgeable crevasses blocked their way. They'd heard an avalanche during the night and the force had shattered the ice bridges that would have provided a way across this portion of the glacier.

"It had looked so promising yesterday," said Father Dominic.

"Like your God," Iliana told him.

"God is an easy target for unbelievers," the priest replied. "For believers as well, actually." He turned to her, unperturbed. "It isn't helpful."

"Fair enough." Iliana looked out across the maze of crevasses. "What *would* be helpful? Besides a helicopter?"

Rafael examined the terrain to their right, to their left, but there seemed little difference in either direction, and little change. Going around was going to be long and arduous and there was no way to tell which way would be better. He looked up toward the summit, but it was once again hidden by clouds and drifting frozen fogs.

"Maybe we could find a way through," he suggested, although he recognized the absurdity of the words as soon as he spoke them.

Neither of the others replied. The three climbers stood together in the sun studying the glacier, the wide cracks and dark lines of shadow. Almost certainly a maze with no exit. Below the glacier the mountainside

presented several potential routes, if they could reach them, then the mountain disappeared in low cloud and haze. Rafael had no idea anymore how far it was to the base camp, or even how much hiking awaited beyond it.

"West," Iliana finally decided.

Putting the shrouded summit to one side, and the glacier and shrouded lower slopes to the other, they set off toward the west.

For the first time in months, Rafael thinks of his father. His father died when he was only fifty-one and Rafael twenty-three. A long and painful death from kidney and liver failure, ravaged lungs, swollen joints, and the cumulative effect of half a dozen other secondary physiological and metabolic malfunctions.

His father had been a veteran of the Vietnam War, serving two tours in the steaming jungles of Southeast Asia. He never talked about those experiences of his own volition, not even when Rafael, as a teenager, asked him several times to tell him what those years had been like. Rafael stopped asking, deciding it wasn't fair to his father. Even when his father lay dying in the V.A. hospital and the doctors admitted that most of his ailments were service-related — frequent contact with Agent Orange being the primary factor — he would not talk about that war.

Rafael's relationship with his mother is and always has been cool and distant, which seems to be what she wants, or needs. He was, however, close to his father, though they really didn't talk much; when they did, it was mostly about sports — football, baseball, college basketball. Rafael has rich and vivid memories of long hot summer afternoons, sitting in the backyard with his father on dirty white plastic deck chairs, drinking cold domestic beer and listening to baseball games on the radio.

He still misses his father.

They hiked and climbed and crawled and pulled and dragged each other along for nearly three days until they reached a long gently sloping rock cleft that cut through the glacier, effectively bypassing the crevasses.

Once they'd traversed the glacier, the descent became familiar again, though he'd thought this portion of the route had actually been much

higher up on the mountain. But when they came to the nearly vertical face just below the Bamboo Col, they discovered that the tens of meters of fixed rope they'd set on the ascent now hung in shreds, split and frayed and swinging listlessly in the cold breeze or lying scattered in pieces on the snow and rock at the bottom of the face. Sabotage was suggested, or some freak and violent storm, but when they inspected the ropes they found that the fibers appeared worn and rotted, as if the ropes had been hanging on this mountainside for decades.

The fixed ropes would have provided a much easier descent of the rocky face — the three of them could have abseiled down the steep drop in less than an hour. Now that wasn't possible, and they didn't have enough extra rope to fix new lines. With night approaching, they made camp and rested for the next day.

In the morning, Father Dominic took the lead, and Rafael was once again astonished at the priest's technical abilities. He found a path they could all negotiate, and they made it to the bottom of the face with more than an hour of daylight remaining to them. They stood together and watched in wonder as the sun dropped behind the horizon and set the ice and the clouds and the sky on fire.

He remembers...he remembers....

Kiyoko asleep on the couch with Dante — their new tiny puff-ball of dark gray kitten no bigger than Rafael's hand — snuggled up under her chin....

The rich scent of wood smoke and pine needles....

Weeping as he stands alone in the frigid black night when he is seventeen, suffocating a newborn pup born minutes earlier with its intestines outside its body....

The rush of emotion fountaining in his belly and chest the first time he kisses Kiyoko, holding her as her two cats watch with suspicion....

Trout fishing with his father, hiking along a rocky mountain stream, breath icy in the early gray morning....

A gull hovering almost stationary about the waves, dipping slightly in the breeze....

The smell of sweat on skin on skin.... Leila's days-old fingers gripping his thumb...the overhead rumble of trucks crossing the bridge spanning

a dry creek bed...the baking heat of summer on the slope of a dune...the two freckles on Kiyoko's cheek just below her left eye....

He remembers....

W

HEN HE WOKE that morning, Yusuf wasn't in the tent. Rafael squirmed out of his sleeping bag and crawled out into the gray, cloudy morning.

Yusuf stood a few meters away with his pack on his shoulders, looking up toward the summit.

"What are you doing?" Rafael asked.

"I'm looking for the city," Yusuf replied. "Kuma-Shan."

Rafael could see nothing above them but cloud and ice and rock. "Do you see it?"

Yusuf shook his head, then turned to gaze down the mountain. "I'm leaving now," he said.

"Where are you going?"

"Down. To the base of the mountain."

"That's where we're all going," Rafael said.

Yusuf shook his head. "I'll be getting there a lot sooner than you will."

With that he started down the mountain, walking straight downhill without regard to the terrain, yet never losing his footing. As he went, each stride, while in appearance normal in length, took him increasing distances down the mountainside so that before long each step traversed twenty meters and more.

Down he went, never looking back, his form becoming smaller and smaller, and when he reached the low clouds and fog, they drifted away, slowly but steadily revealing the mountain's lower slopes.

To Rafael's dismay, those slopes went on and on and on.... Yusuf was barely distinguishable now, a moving red spot against a vast expanse of crystalline white mottled with streaks and patches of motionless dark colors. Soon, all the clouds and mist had scattered, and Rafael could see no end to the mountain, only a gradually increasing vagueness as his vision became incapable of distinguishing anything at such great distances.

For some time now, Rafael's great fear had been that, when they completed their second descent of the mountain, they would awaken the



next morning to find themselves once again just below the summit, preparing for a third descent. That fear was now gone, replaced by one darker and more terrifying — that the second descent would never end.

A numb exhaustion overwhelmed him, and with weak legs he made his way to a narrow slab of rock and sat, gazing down on that endless expanse.

When Leila is five years old, she contracts bacterial meningitis, and for three days lies close to death in the ICU, with the physicians unable to tell Rafael and Kiyoko if their daughter will survive. Rafael and Kiyoko virtually live in the hospital, sleep and eat there, and wander the corridors one at a time like lost somnambulists.

In the evening of the third day, Rafael goes out onto the hospital's rooftop garden and sits on a bench, looking up at the stars. For two days a terrible dread has grown in him, so debilitating that he can barely function. He rarely speaks, thinking is slow and muddy, and even the simplest of movements seems beyond him, for nearly every possible future he contemplates is filled with that dread, and it cannot be dispelled.

The stars glimmer weakly against the muted dark sky so pale in comparison to the bright obsidian night sky above the world's highest mountains. Rafael lets himself fully imagine the different possible outcomes for Leila, and what each would mean for all of them. He imagines first what it would be like if Leila dies, how his grief might take hold of him, tear open a wound in his heart that would never heal, how Kiyoko's grief might manifest, and how their mutual grief and emptiness might impact their own relationship — even there he can imagine several possibilities, almost none of them good.

His jaw aches from clenching, his stomach cramps, and he wipes tears from his face with a trembling hand. Several minutes pass before his breathing is slow and even.

Then he imagines what their lives would be like if Leila survives, but with severe and permanent brain damage....

...or lifelong disabilities....

...or chronic pain....

...OR....

He grips the bench to hold himself upright, wrung out, exhausted, and dizzy, as if he sits in a small rowboat out at sea.

Eventually, he lets himself revel in the possibility of a full recovery, the relief and joy and gratitude that brings, along with a greater appreciation for their lives.

Finally, he imagines once again how his life might be if Leila dies, and this time the pain is muted, the dread fainter.

When he has finished with all of these imaginings and re-imaginings, he realizes that the dread has faded from each possible outcome. He isn't at peace with all of those futures, but he feels that he has come to terms with them in an important way, and that he will be able to go on with his life no matter what happens.

Several days later, when Leila has in fact fully recovered and they bring her home, he tries to explain to Kiyoko what happened on that rooftop, and explain his thinking and the state of mind he reached. She doesn't understand, however, and no matter how he words it, or what approach he takes, it always seems to her that he is saying it would have been okay if Leila had died, and that any outcome is just as good as any other.

He tries two or three more times in the next few days, but he cannot get her to understand what he thinks *he* understands. He stops trying, and they never speak of it again.

When Iliana and Father Dominic emerged from their tent and saw Rafael sitting on the rock staring down at the lower slopes of the mountain once again shrouded in low clouds, neither of them said a word. He turned to look at them, and they returned his gaze, but still they didn't speak. Perhaps there was something in his eyes, or the way he held himself.

They packed up the tent, shouldered their packs, checked their boots and gloves and other equipment, then with one last glance at him and a pair of nods, they turned and started down the mountain.

Rafael could not blame them. Why should they speak to him, or expect him to join them? Why would they want to continue with someone who had so clearly given up, why would they want to risk being influenced or infected with his own sense of futility?

As he watches Iliana and the priest move away from him, a thought

drifts through his mind, almost insubstantial, yet incandescent, and he grasps at it. A catch of panic halts his breath for a moment as he fears losing this glimmer of insight. He brings it slowly and carefully into focus and considers it for a time, catching fragments of understanding until he finally reaches a growing if incomplete comprehension.

For the first time in days or weeks, Rafael feels a calm within himself. He recognizes that it is impossible to ever know for certain if this new fear of his is true — that the second descent will never end. The one thing he might possibly learn is that it is false...and the only way he can learn that is to go on. He decides he will not fear or give up to something that he can never, ever know.

Rafael pushes off the rock, breaks down his tent and packs it away, then follows the others as they resume their descent. †



*"As you well know, your options are limited."*



# SCIENCE

PAT MURPHY & PAUL DOHERTY

## TIME FOR SOME CHANGE

**O**PEN UP your wallet, and take a look at some of those green pieces of paper you carry around.

Money is strange stuff, as strange as any invention of science fiction. A few writers have considered the peculiarities of this strange invention—from Cory Doctorow’s exploration of the concept of reputation-based economics in *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* to Neal Stephenson’s Baroque cycle, which deals with the nature of money and includes Isaac Newton as a character.

In the Stephenson series, the King of France sends a counterfeiter to England to destabilize the currency, and England brings in one of the most intelligent persons of the age, Isaac Newton, to combat the threat. Back in Newton’s time, “clippers” slyly clipped valuable metal off the edges of coins and then spent the coin at its full value.

As master of the mint (yes, he really was), Newton thwarted clippers by milling the edges of coins. If the milling was gone, you knew someone had been snipping off bits of the coin.

Today people don’t clip the edges of dollar bills, since the paper of the bill has little intrinsic value. But counterfeiters still come up with clever ways to produce bogus money. On the day that we are writing this column (September 20, 2007), the U.S. Treasury is announcing a new design for the five-dollar bill, one that includes a number of new anti-counterfeiting features.

In this column, we’re going to examine those pieces of paper from your wallet and we’re going to consider the latest skirmishes in a technological war has been going on for centuries—the ongoing battle between the legitimate minters of money and the counterfeiters. The U.S. Bureau of Engraving and Printing strives to make currency that’s

durable, relatively cheap to manufacture, and impossible for anyone else to duplicate. And criminals who want to make a quick buck strive to fabricate convincing counterfeits, pieces of paper that look like the ones the Bureau produces. This battle has led to some significant changes in money you use — and will lead to more changes in the future.

### A TWISTED HISTORY

Counterfeiting has a long and illustrious history, with some great twists and turns.

Back in the mid-1800s, for instance, a clever counterfeiter discovered how to make counterfeit gold sovereigns that had the correct density. To accomplish this, the counterfeiter alloyed platinum (which was then cheaper than gold) with copper to make coins with the correct density but less gold than the real thing. Of course, with the current value of platinum twice that of gold, those fakes are likely to be worth more than the originals today.

Counterfeiting has long been an international business. When the American colonies started printing paper money, copies of that currency were printed in

Germany, England, Amsterdam, and Ireland, where manufacturing this bogus American currency wasn't illegal. During the American Revolution, the British counterfeited the dissident colonies' currency in an effort to undermine the new government.

The U.S. didn't have a national currency until 1863. Before that time, each bank issued its own currency. Since each bank had its own designs, it's no wonder people found it tough to identify counterfeits among the 7,000 different varieties of legitimate bills. Estimates indicate that one third of the currency in circulation in the early 1860s was bogus. There was a thriving business in "Counterfeit Detectors," monthly lists describing the bogus bills and how to identify them.

When a national currency was adopted, counterfeiters didn't hesitate to duplicate the new "greenbacks." Pat has a favorite counterfeiter: Thomas Peter McCartney, who lectured as Professor Joseph Woods during the period from 1863 to 1868. The learned professor lectured on the art of detecting counterfeits. His talks were illustrated with the nineteenth-century equivalent of a Power Point presentation: large and detailed

drawings on which he pointed out defects of many of the better-known counterfeits.

Of course, right after Professor Woods left town, some of Thomas Peter McCartney's confederates would arrive and pass some excellent counterfeits that lacked the flaws that the knowledgeable professor had described. Apparently lecturing alone was not lucrative enough for the good professor.

### JUST PAPER AND INK

Are you still clutching those bills you pulled from your wallet? Before we get into the high-tech innovations that have been introduced in the last twenty years, let's take a look at some of the safeguards against counterfeiting that date back to 1863.

First, examine the paper on which the currency is printed. This paper is produced by Crane & Company of Massachusetts and shipped to Washington, D.C., in armored trucks. Possession of this paper by unauthorized individuals is a federal crime.

Currency paper is made with a special blend of linen and cotton fibers, with three pounds of red and blue fibers for every ten thousand pounds of untinted fiber. If you look

at a bill under a bright light with a magnifying lens, you may be able to spot some red and blue fibers in the paper. Those fibers make the paper difficult to duplicate. To be convincing, a counterfeit bill must contain those tiny streaks of red and blue. Some counterfeiters have drawn or printed red and blue lines on their bills; others have glued tiny fibers on.

There are other ways to distinguish currency paper from regular paper. Under an ultraviolet or "black light" lamp, ordinary paper will fluoresce or glow as the bleaching agents in the paper absorb the ultraviolet light and reemit visible light. But currency paper won't glow, since no bleaching agents are used in its production. Paul often carries a tiny ultraviolet LED mini torch, which has an ultraviolet light emitting diode and can be used detecting counterfeit currency (among other things).

Of course, genuine currency that has gone through the washer in the pocket of your jeans will glow under ultraviolet light if your laundry detergent contains whiteners. And genuine paper is no guarantee of a genuine bill. Think for a moment and we bet you can come up with a readily available source of genuine currency paper.

That's right: a great source of currency paper is currency itself. Counterfeiters have been known to bleach a batch of dollar bills and print hundred-dollar bills on the paper. That's a very nice profit margin!

Now, run your finger over the surface of a bill. Can you feel the raised lines of ink? U.S. currency is printed on an *intaglio* press, which uses an engraved steel plate. The process leaves mounds of ink on the paper that you can feel. Because that ink is ferromagnetic, a strong magnet, such as a rare earth or neodymium magnet, will attract a dollar bill, a characteristic that helps both vending machines and the automatic sorting machines at Federal Reserve banks detect counterfeits.

Take a look at the elaborate scrolls and flourishes that decorate the borders of each bill. Those are also anti-counterfeiting measures. Because of the printing methods used, every curlicue and detail has crisp lines. When U.S. currency was first designed, only a skilled printer could make a convincing duplicate of a hundred-dollar bill. The printing precision required by the design was difficult for counterfeiters to duplicate — until relatively recently.

## DESKTOP COUNTERFEITING

From 1939 to 1990, there weren't any big changes in the overall look of U.S. currency. Oh, there were some modifications: experiments with the composition of the paper in the forties, the addition of "In God We Trust" in 1957, the shift from Silver Certificates to Federal Reserve Notes. But the overall look and feel of the bills remained fairly static. Some other countries changed their money designs regularly, but not the United States.

In the early 1990s, that changed. Why? Because the tools available to would-be counterfeiters had improved dramatically with the development of the color copier and color printer.

In 1991, government agents recovered between six and eight million dollars' worth of counterfeit currency that had been produced using color copiers and printers. At that time, desktop counterfeiting was a growing industry, doubling each year. Design changes that the Treasury Department began introducing in the 1990s were intended to thwart these casual counterfeiters.

If you have a five or a ten or a twenty among the bills in your wallet, take a look at the series

number on the bills. This number is just to the right of the portrait on the bill and it indicates the date of the design for this particular bill (not the date the bill was printed).

According to the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, one-dollar, five-dollar, and ten-dollar bills generally wear out in around a year and a half. Twenty-dollar bills, which aren't handled as much, may last for two years. A fifty may be around for as long as five years and a hundred-dollar bill has an average life span of eight and a half years. So the odds are good that you'll find some bills of relatively recent vintage in your wallet.

If the bill you're examining is worth five dollars or more, look the dead president in the eye and hold the bill up to the light. Examine the blank area just to the left of the Federal Reserve seal. Unless you have a genuine antique on your hands, you'll see a clear polyester thread running vertically through the paper. The thread is printed with words that identify the bill's denomination: the twenty will have the words U.S.A. TWENTY, for example. A photocopy of the bill would lack this thread. This thread was among the first anti-counterfeiting measures included in the new currency designs.

If you have a magnifying glass, you may be able to spot another anti-counterfeiting measure: a line of microprinting that runs around the rim of the central portrait says THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA. Back when this microprinting was added to bills, it was so small that it couldn't be reproduced with a photocopier or scanner. Those days are long past, but the microprinting remains. The microprinting and the security thread are included on all bills worth five dollars or more dating from after 1993.

Hold the bill up to the light again. Depending on the vintage of the bill, you may see a watermark, a translucent pattern created when the paper was made. Depending on the bill's denomination and age, you may see a few other anti-counterfeiting measures. The latest version of the ten-dollar bill (introduced in 2006), the twenty-dollar bill (introduced in 2003), and the fifty-dollar bill (introduced in 2004) all include numbers in color-changing ink, which looks copper colored from one angle and green from another.

One of the changes that sounds dramatic (but isn't) was the introduction of background colors other than green. The twenty-dollar bill,



for example, includes peach, blue, and light green. The new fifty has background colors of blue and red and images of a waving American flag and a small metallic silver-blue star. The new ten has background colors of orange, yellow, and red. The Treasury Department's website at [www.moneyfactory.gov](http://www.moneyfactory.gov) goes on and on (and on and on) about these additional colors, but frankly, they are fairly easy to overlook.

All these security features — which can't be duplicated with a color copier or printer — have succeeded in slowing desktop counterfeiting. Something else that helped was a change in copier and printer technology: many copies and scanners and photo editing programs include currency detection features. When we tried to photocopy a twenty-dollar bill at one hundred percent (in the interest of science, of course), we got an error message. Apparently some color laser printers and copiers now encode their serial number and manufacturing code in a set of tiny yellow dots on every copy they make. We've read that these dots are visible if magnified under blue light. We looked but couldn't find any sign of these dots. The theory is that the Treasury Department can use these hidden markings to track phony money

back to its source. (There are, of course, privacy issues to examine here, but that's another column.)

### THE MORE THINGS CHANGE...

Back in 1996, the Bureau of Engraving and Printing announced that they would be introducing new designs every seven to ten years to stay ahead of currency counterfeiters — and they've been true to their word. The most recent new design is the five-dollar bill, which is scheduled to begin circulating in 2008. It includes a large, borderless portrait of Lincoln, a very large purple numeral 5 on the back, and background colors of purple, red, and pink.

The watermark on the earlier redesign of the five was a portrait of Lincoln. In the new bill, the watermark is a numeral 5. That change is a direct response to counterfeiting: the older five could be bleached and reprinted as a one hundred-dollar bill. By changing the watermark and the position of the security thread, the designers of the new bill want to make this form of counterfeiting more difficult.

But the more things change, the more they stay the same. Counterfeiting was an international industry back before the American Revolution — and it's an international

industry today. In recent years, counterfeiting operations have been traced to Columbia, Eastern Europe, and North Korea. In Korea, a government-funded operation is alleged to produce "supernotes," almost perfect counterfeit hundreds printed on an intaglio press on paper that is identical to the official currency paper.

But counterfeits that are far less convincing than the supernotes are passed every day to people who just aren't paying attention. We think the best anti-counterfeiting measure of all is a low-tech technique that we constantly apply at the Exploratorium: take another look. Keep an eye out for the features described here. If you want to spend a little more time examining (and experimenting with) money, check out the chapter on money in *Exploratoria*, the Exploratorium's recent book on ways to explore everything in your world.

### PROMISES, PROMISES

Money serves a variety of functions, according to economists and anthropologists. Money serves as a medium of exchange — that is, we can use it to buy stuff. It serves as a standard of value — a way of comparing the value of different things.

I can buy two apples for a dollar and only one organic pluot, so money lets me compare apples and pluots. Money also acts as a store of value — a means of accumulating wealth.

Pat just can't write about money without mentioning her favorite form of money, which is used on the Micronesian island of Yap. On Yap, stone disks that measure up to twelve feet in diameter serve as a form of money. Quarried on an island that's 250 miles away and transported to Yap by boat, the ownership of these stones brings prestige to the owner. Basically, having a sizeable stone makes you wealthy.

Before you start snickering about the odd ways of the folks on Yap, think hard about those pieces of paper from your wallet. The use of paper money didn't catch on until the 1700s when goldsmiths started issuing people bills of receipt for gold they had on deposit. Those bills could be turned in and the gold delivered upon demand. People could then transfer the bills from one to another while the gold remained in the vault.

Until 1971, with a few exceptions, paper money was backed by precious metal on deposit. In 1971 the U.S. government stopped promising that it would back the value of

the currency it printed with the gold on deposit at Fort Knox. Money — whatever its form — is only valuable because we say it is. That's true whether the money is big stone disks or pictures of dead presidents.

The money we use is backed by nothing more (or less) than our collective belief in it. Basically, the value of our currency is based on our faith in its value. Now that's science fiction!

The Exploratorium is San

Francisco's museum of science, art, and human perception — where science and science fiction meet. Paul Doherty works there. Pat Murphy used to work there, but now she works at Klutz Press ([www.klutz.com](http://www.klutz.com)), a publisher of how-to books for kids. Pat's latest novel is *The Wild Girls*. To learn more about Pat Murphy's writing, visit her web site at [www.brazenhussies.net/murphy](http://www.brazenhussies.net/murphy). For more on Paul Doherty's work and his latest adventures, visit [www.exo.net/~pauld](http://www.exo.net/~pauld).



## COMING ATTRACTIONS

MOST WRITERS WOULD be content to give you one good thriller. Next month, Robert Reed outdoes himself with "Five Thrillers," a humdinger of a story. Science fiction hasn't seen a hero like the great Joseph Carroway in quite some time.

On a quieter note, the great Kate Wilhelm takes us to Italy, where we find that everything that meets the eye might not be as it seems. "The Fountain of Neptune" is vintage Wilhelm...which is to say, it's first-rate fiction.

Among the other stories coming soon are a new Clem Crowder story by Al Michaud, Steven Utley's latest venture into the Silurian Age, and tales by some writers whose names might not be familiar to you, including Scott Dalrymple, Alex Jeffers, Laura Kasischke, Ted Kosmatka, Mary Patterson Thornburg, and George V. Tucker. It all adds up to lots of great reading, so make sure you've got a subscription to ensure that you won't miss an issue.

*Rich Mueller wrote this story after writing and producing an episode of Dogfights for the History Channel. The episode dealt with F4F Wildcat pilots and the Battle of Guadalcanal. Researching the story renewed his appreciation of World War II vets and those folks who are said to belong to "the Greatest Generation."*

# A Ten-Pound Sack of Rice

*By Richard Mueller*

**N**ATHAN ROULLON KNEW that his day was coming. He had just turned eighty-eight and they had all made a fuss, as they did every year,

giving him cake and ice cream and other things he could not eat. And there was whiskey, which he drank anyway. No sense in living so long that he could only exist on air and religion.

He did not know the day that would be his day, but he was certain it would be between his eighty-eighth birthday and his eighty-ninth, and sooner rather than later. He knew, because something else was coming, something that was not coming just at him.

He had seen the billboards, the advertisements, even heard the radio pitchmen and preachers, though it was becoming increasingly difficult to tell them apart. It was all the same thing, whether for movies or car sales or salvation; it was all about money.

Nathan yawned and rocked and watched the sunset from his porch; reds, oranges and pinks, herons and pelicans, and a sad ship's whistle from the Commercial Channel. A warm breeze ruffled the cattails, and

somewhere distant a dog barked on and on. But 666 was coming.

June 6, 2006, had come and gone, a minor news item and a subject for jokes. Nothing had happened except the usual small horrors of man's conditional love for his fellow man, and calculated indifference to his world. Nothing would. The day of Revelation was not figured on the same calendar used to sell Firestone Tires or fish from Boudreaux's. It was coming and Nathan knew the signs. He would have some warning as to when, though he could not begin to know why, or how, or even how much. He could just see the beginning of the end, like an ink line at the borders of his vision, or a shadow on the horizon. There would be visitations and signs, and then it would happen.

It was a bitter tickle to Nathan to know that all the religions had got it wrong. That true good and evil was more basic, more fundamental than religion, like a subterranean river whose elements had neither names nor qualities. That it would all happen without God, and the preachers would never know — though at the end they would believe in their own holiness and congratulate themselves, never understanding that it was all foolishness.

Nathan stretched his old bones. His cat, Murphy, walked past his chair and down the steps of the front porch, sniffing the air and yawning. He gave an experimental swipe at a passing fly, then subsided, considering but not grooming his whiskers.

Nathan could no longer remember all the cats he'd had: at least forty since he'd returned from the Pacific. They'd come to him in their ones and twos, boy cats and girl cats, some old, some as kittens, and some with kittens. The one before Murphy had been Bettina, the one before Bettina, Jake. Or Jack. They were like travelers passing through Roullon Station on their way to wherever cats went. But he fed them, and they were a comfort.

Nathan smiled. "You a good cat, you." If Murphy heard him, he gave no sign. He was watching a car turn down the gravel road that led from the delta road to his house, and Murphy did not like company. He didn't like anyone but Nathan. Murphy stretched up briefly like a prairie dog, then trotted off behind the little house. He would not reappear until Nathan was again alone.

The car was his nephew's beat-up red Chevy. Joshua brought his groceries and mail, told him about happenings, gossip, and generally took

care of Nathan's business affairs. Nathan had flown off carriers in World War II. Joshua had been a mud Marine in Vietnam. It turned out to be the social glue that kept Nathan connected to the rest of the family. Most of them had let crusty, opinionated old Nathan drift away, but not Joshua, who once told Nathan he too could see his own last days coming. Most of the family chased after money or things. Joshua's vice was religion, but Nathan tolerated it so that he could get his mail and groceries; theirs was an easy truce among outcasts.

"Evening, Nathan."

"Josh'wa."

"Let me put this stuff away and I'll set a spell. If that's all right with you. You want a beer?"

"Yassuh."

Joshua took the cardboard box and bag into the kitchen where Nathan could hear him loading the refrigerator. When he came out he handed Nathan a Lone Star and sat down on the steps. Nathan could smell the sweet, acid tang coming from the bottle. He sipped it almost delicately. It would bite him later, but he savored the taste now; the meaning of life, a full bottle of suds. Beer, and a ten-pound sack of rice.

Joshua took a long pull, then set his bottle down between his knees. "That's so good."

"Mmmm-huh." Nathan smiled. "Not a sin that, to consume the alcohol then?"

"That which is not a sin entire, is not a sin in moderation," Joshua said, quoting some preacher he'd read or heard.

"Amen," said Nathan, smiling. The Last Day. When it came it would take the good and the bad, and the gentle, well-meaning ones like Joshua. It didn't seem fair, but then, what did? He remembered the young gunner's face as his bullets bit into him, saw his body slump down in the cockpit, his arm crooked over the edge, his machine gun pointing skyward.

"You okay there, Uncle Nathan?"

"Yah."

"You back in the war?"

"Yah."

Nathan had told his nephew of his combat experiences, about flying off carriers, about Guadalcanal and the Cactus Air Force, of Wildcats and

Hellcats and Zeroes, and being shot down. He'd even told him about the ten-pound sack of rice — just not about the gunner.

Joshua had grown up at the end of the Old South. He'd gone to Nam and fought and bled and smoked dope with the black guys, humped the yellow girls, and come back to help build the New South. Some of Nathan's generation had also learned this lesson, though not enough, and none quite as well as Nathan Roullon.

He and his stubby little F4F-4 Wildcat — Number 66 — had tangled with a long string of Japanese aircraft; Zeroes, "Val" dive bombers, "Kate" torpedo bombers, and a sprinkling of float-plane fighters. On that last day he'd shot down five bandits in ten minutes — and then that last torpedo plane, with the gunner....

Roullon saw those tracers arcing toward his Wildcat, watched the canopy shatter, felt them hitting the body of Number 66. He glanced at his watch, an irresistible urge to know the moment of his death, just as a 7.7mm bullet clipped it off his wrist.

The gunner had not been much older than sixteen, a kid, or at least that's how he looked: a scared, undernourished Jap kid with a machine gun, but he was good. Lieutenant Junior Grade Nathan Roullon had been firing at the kid all this time, and just as he ran out of ammunition the last few .50 caliber bullets hit the gunner, walking up his body, and killed him. The boy looked at Nathan with the terrible realization of everything he had lost, the moment of the end of his life, and then died.

But the last shots the boy had taken had stopped Nathan's engine, the prop stuck up like a middle finger. Number 66, her momentum gone, began to fall toward the sea. Nathan struggled to get the canopy open and tumbled out, playing dead in his chute until he plunged into the cool, blue waters of The Slot.

He'd made it to the beach on Kolombangara where native tribesmen, who had long mistrusted the white man but who had quickly come to hate the Japanese, took him as a trophy. Finally, they bartered him to an Australian coastwatcher for a ten-pound sack of rice.

"Muh time's comin' soon," Nathan announced, "but I know muh worth."

"Ten pounds of rice."

"Yup."

"You're worth much more than that," Joshua said, watching the setting sun through the glass neck of the Lone Star bottle.

"Chem'cals," the old pilot sighed, steadfastly refusing to deal with Joshua's religious views. "Chem'cals an' time an' e-lectric'ty. What we do."

"Well, you done all right," his nephew said. "Considering what the rest of the world's like these days."

"An' what's it like?"

Joshua set the empty aside. Nathan knew that he wanted another, but since Joshua had bought it for his uncle, he would not drink another beer unless asked. Nathan shook his head. Man should know enough to say what he wants. He understood the lights he was seeing in the sunset, heard the clocks ticking inside him, and what they meant. He handed Joshua his beer, still almost full. "Here, drink dis. I can't finish it."

"Thanks." Joshua took a grateful sip and then looked around. An unexpectedly cool breeze ruffled the swamp grasses. Above the Gulf vees of black-winged birds spread under the clouds. The distant lights of Thibodeaux and Doremus were coming on.

"Funny thing about Doremus Parish," Joshua said. "Hurricanes never seem to come here, not in a long time anyway. This house was built when, 1930?"

"1927, sumpin' like dat."

"Mmmm." Joshua was right. Katrina, Rita, all of them seemed to sheer off and miss Doremus Parish. "I think you're good luck, Uncle."

"Me?"

"You. I think you keep the hurricanes away."

"An' I t'ink you crazy," Nathan chuckled.

"I didn't know you had a cat."

"I allus have a cat." Nathan looked up. Murphy was sitting by the foot of the steps, regarding Joshua with guarded calm. "Tha's new. He only comes out ta me."

"Well, cats will do what they will." For a religious man, Joshua had an uncommon amount of sense.

Murphy sat quietly in his own world, taking in the dusk. Joshua made a tentative move to scratch the old tom, but hesitated. "Bet' not. He don' like that, even when I do't."



Joshua nodded, but stretched his hand down anyway and scratched Murphy between the shoulders. Instead of running away, Murphy regarded Joshua with an air of what Nathan could only think of as tolerant respect, then wriggled down into a sphinx-like pose, paws pointing forward. He put his head down, closed his eyes, and went to sleep. After a moment, Joshua pulled back his hand and looked at Nathan. "My, my."

"He never done that, even f' me."

"Maybe he's sick."

"He not sick." It's the coming change, he thought. The glow in the air, the birds, everything swept away like a bad movie ad, but lighter, subtler. Now you see it, now you don't.

"You coming to dinner Sunday?"

If there was a Sunday, Nathan thought, but he said, "'spect so."

"We're having Sophie's chicken."

"Mmmm. I likes dat, me."

"I know." Joshua rose, patted Nathan on the shoulder, then wiped his hands on the legs of his pants. "You take care, Nathan. Call me if you need anything."



**A**FTER JOSHUA HAD GONE, Nathan watched the darkness crowd in around his porch. The night birds began to call as the earth cooled down, but Nathan stayed warm. Murphy awoke, stretched, sat down by his chair. With a fatalistic shrug, Nathan reached down and petted the cat.

"Well, dis is new."

"I know. I'm sorry about that."

Nathan froze, but only for a moment. He was entering a tunnel of miracles, a dark ride, where nothing would be totally unexpected. "You talk."

"Yes," Murphy replied, pointlessly. He swept a paw across his whiskers. It was obvious to Nathan that Murphy was a cat of few words and that he did not talk because he didn't like to. And yet....

"Why you choose ta talk now?"

"You know."

"Because th' end is coming?"

"Something is," the cat replied, as if a talking cat were the most

natural thing in the world. Here, in the dusky red twilight of the Gulf, Nathan could almost believe that it was. Something was out there, beyond the swamp grass of the Mississippi, beyond Joshua's little Godly house and the city of drowned pleasures. Something was coming.

"D'ya know what it is?"

"A change," Murphy replied. "A bridge between worlds."

"Like two boats bumpin' in da fog," Nathan said softly. "You kin step frum one ta d'other as dey touch."

Murphy blinked, saying nothing.

"An da boats? Is one gon' sink?"

"I don't know, Nathan."

"Fer a magic cat, ya doan know much."

Like *A Christmas Carol*, Nathan thought. First Joshua, then the cat...and there the analogy crumbled. Nathan Roullon was eighty-eight years old. There was not a great deal of time left in his life, and little or no good that he could do for others, whether he changed or not. And could he affect what was coming? Even if he knew?"

He sat still. It was after midnight. Murphy lay asleep in his lap. The night had gone quiet. And then Nathan heard it, the soft crunch of gravel. Someone was coming down the lane.

"Company," muttered Murphy, opening an eye.

"Shhh. Keep quiet, you."

The faint pool of light from his porch spilled out to the edge of the road. When the walking man reached the edge of the light, he stopped. Only his legs were visible, and those barely.

"Who's dere?" Nathan asked, keeping his voice steady. He could sense the tension in Murphy and touched his back reassuringly.

"My name is Horii Sado," the man replied, his words with only the slightest trace of an accent. "May I come up?"

Nathan said nothing, but Horii Sado stepped forward. He was young, dressed in a shabby khaki uniform that hung loose on his spare frame. Nathan's heart almost stopped. He had seen this man every night in his dreams since that moment over the Solomons when his bullets had killed him: the young gunner from the torpedo plane. "Tha's impossible," Nathan stuttered.

"So is a talking cat," Murphy said softly.

Nathan was suddenly angry. "Why are you here?" he demanded. "An' why'd you come like dat?"

Sado smiled. "I wanted you to recognize me. I wanted you to know I'm serious."

"Serious? You come ta kill me?"

Sado laughed. "Why bother? You are weeks from death, perhaps days. There's a different time coming. An end time. A change in ownership. Seeing you was an afterthought."

Murphy squeezed his eyes shut and growled. Nathan patted his back, there, there, and Murphy grew quiet. Nathan regarded the young man who stood looking up from the driveway, using Murphy's interruption to collect his thoughts. If the boy was indeed Satan or the Prince of Darkness or the Anti-Christ, why come to him? Was it some sort of test, or a torment?

"Why you come bother me, ghost? I killed dat boy fair 'n square in combat, in da war. I sorry for it, but das da way war is. I kill him or he kill me. An' I never had no truck wit' da Devil, hear?"

Sado smiled again. "It is always good to meet a man who knows his mind," he said softly.

"So you kin know who gets ta step to da other boat?"

"Something like that."

"Mmmmp. So da worl' gone end den?"

"Not necessarily. Everything ends sooner or later. When is up to my discretion."

"So you gets to say if it end on Sat'day or Sunday?"

"I have more leeway than that."

Murphy stood up and stretched with the insolence only a cat could show before Satan. He licked a paw, then turned his face toward Sado. "This is that sort of test then? The big one, for the end of the world?"

"He talks." Nathan felt the need to explain. This was his house, his life still, and he would not let go of his reasons.

"They all do. He made them that way."

"He?"

Sado pointed upward and mouthed the word "God."

"You afraid o' him too?"

Sado sneered. "He threw me out of Heaven. Look where I landed. This shithole. And I still can't get away from Him. He put me to work, here, among you lesser life forms...."

Nathan snorted, resisting the urge to make the sign of the cross. He had left religion long ago during the war, when he had made a separate peace with God, and he was not about to backslide now.

"Go ahead, cross yourself."

"No."

"If you don't believe in Him, how can you believe in me?"

"Who says I don' b'leave in God?" Nathan snapped. "An you standin' right here. But if you lookin' fer a righteous man, I t'ink you better head on down da road."

"I'm not looking for a righteous man," Sado said. "I'm looking for an interesting one."

**N**ATHAN FELT the G forces as he banked sharply to avoid the puffs of flak coming up. American flak, from American ships, but it played no favorites. It would kill without prejudice, tear off wings and engine, strip away his life as easily as crushing a grape. Leveling out, he pushed Number 66 into a long shallow turn over Guadalcanal, moving away from the anti-aircraft guns, looking for targets.

He stared at his hands — young hands, with no age marks. Where the Hell am I? The answer came in his headset.

"Number 66, come in. This is Satan, over."

You cruel sonofabitch. "What you doin' ta me?"

"Everybody has something he would like to do over. I guess I'm just curious."

"I ain't flown a plane in forty years...."

"This is 1942. You fly all the time. Have fun."

Nathan grunted in angry pain, but he looked around, scanning the sky. And he remembered. They would be north, over The Slot, on the way in. His flight would catch them near Kolombangara. He swung the little Wildcat around north-north-west and increased speed.

It came back to him, but then it was never gone, he realized. I'm Nathan Roullon, eighty-eight years old, but I'm also Nathan Roullon,

Lieutenant Junior Grade, United States Navy Reserve, twenty years old. Just three weeks in Wildcats and here I am in combat. He tried to clear his mind of the contradictions and simply fly the plane.

He put on speed, casting his attention around the compass for Zekes or Oscars, nasty little surprises from the Japanese base on Buna, but there were none, so he busied himself with making sure all his guns were primed, checking oxygen, fuel, pitch, and mixture. He tried to remember, with his eighty-eight-year-old memories, just where they'd come from. Before it came to him, they did.

He saw them low, wing after wing of Kates, three-man torpedo planes. Kates had only one gun, in the rear, but attacking from the front was no cinch, at least when they were in formation. If his firing pass crossed into the range of those massed guns they'd shoot him apart. Nathan had his own way of dealing with them: from behind and below.

He cut into a long wide spiral to circle around the formation — and almost died. He felt bullets cutting into the armored turtleback behind his head and pushed over into a sharp dive. As he pulled around he saw the plane following him, a Pete, a nasty little float-plane fighter with two guns forward and one aft. It wasn't particularly fast or sturdy, but it could turn on a dime, and it was on his tail. Still, the Wildcat had a few tricks left.

He throttled back and sideslipped, catching the Pete off guard. The Japanese plane slid past, and now Nathan was behind it. A two-second burst from his six .50 caliber machine guns, and the Pete was falling like a burning flower. What did I do next?

He saw a *chutai* of Kates, low and moving fast above the cool, green waters of The Slot, and knew that this was where he was supposed to be. There were six of the long-bodied torpedo planes headed toward the American ships lying off of Lunga Point, ships loaded with soldiers and Marines.

As he dropped low and curved wide to move in behind them, he saw the problem. To attack Kates from the rear you needed to be below them so their gunners couldn't track you. But these were flying at less than a hundred meters. It would be a tight squeeze to stay below them and not wind up in the drink.

Like most American fighter pilots, Nathan Roullon was enough of a hot dog to have been reprimanded for stunting, flying under bridges, and

doing victory rolls. He felt the responsive little Wildcat through his feet, his hands, the seat of his pants, and was certain that, if the situation required, he could skip it across the surface of the sea like a flat stone. As he dropped toward the rolling swells, he worried that it might come to that.

They saw him coming in, and the gunners at the edges of the formation tried to pin him in a crossfire. The bullets screamed by within a foot of his tailplane, but he was in too close and too low. He popped his nose up and fired a two-second burst at the tail-end Charlie, which folded into a blazing rose and dropped into the sea with a tremendous explosion.

Dodging the spray of rubble, he jinked right, tilted left, and brought down a second Kate, but the four remaining aircraft continued on in formation. Nathan knew that they'd hang stubbornly together for fire support, even as he picked them off. American pilots would have split up at the first attack, but Japanese tactical discipline was strong.

He picked off two more, then came up on the tail of a Kate with two yellow bands around the fuselage. Time seemed to slow down. That's him, he thought. The kid. Horii, the one that will shoot me down.

"Get your mind in the game."

"Shut up, you devil, you."

Suddenly the yellow-banded Kate banked and rose in a sloppy climb to lead him away from the last plane. A Kate could climb as fast as a Wildcat, but not while lugging a torpedo, and the pilot seemed reluctant to jettison his deadly load. Pulling back on the stick, Nathan and Number 66 rose and closed for a shot, but the Kate slipped sideways and skidded off to the north. The pilot was good — obviously some sort of *honcho*.

As the Kate swung back around on course for Lunga Point, the gunner poured a stream of 7.7mm slugs at Nathan, speckling his left wing, but Wildcats were tough. Nathan dropped down into a swift dive, pulled up, and fired. His slugs walked from the Kate's wing root through the long glass greenhouse, killing the pilot and the bombardier. Again, time seemed to slow.

The Kate was flying on, its dead pilot's hand on the stick, flames licking at the fuselage. The doomed plane's gunner sat straight up, ready to fire, watching Number 66 slide in closer. The two men looked at each other.

"Kill him."

Shut up.

"It's your duty, Cajun. He's the enemy. Kill him."

"I'm the one flyin' dis plane," he said aloud, watching the gunner bend low over his machine gun. Then a stream of tracers leapt out, crashing into his engine, shattering the cockpit glass, clipping the watch off his wrist. Smoke and glycol erupted from the cowling.

Nathan fired, but not at the gunner. His slugs tore the engine off the Kate, staggering it, sending it down. As Nathan's engine quit, he screamed to the boy, "Bail out! Get out of there." Then he popped his canopy, rolled Number 66 over, and dropped into the thick tropical air.

As Number 66 dropped spinning toward the sea, Nathan floated down, angling toward it, as if he were trying to reclaim his plane.

The Devil's voice crackled in his disconnected headset. "You were supposed to kill him."

"The pilot was dead. The plane was going down."

"You let him shoot you down."

Nathan ripped off the headset and flung it away. A few seconds later he splashed down, not ten yards from the Wildcat, which was floating upside down on the gentle rollers. Freeing himself from his chute, he stroked to the plane and pulled the life raft from its compartment. Miraculously, it had not been punctured.

He saw the other chute floating in the water and made for it. The gunner was alive, trying to free himself, and when he saw Nathan he pulled out a slim Nambu pistol, but it slipped from his hand and sank. Nathan had his .45 out, and when the little Jap tried to puncture his raft with a knife, he clubbed him over the head with his pistol.

Nathan Roullon stood on the dark sand beach and watched the young Japanese gunner. He was unconscious, but breathing softly. Joshua stepped out of the jungle. "You didn't kill him. Why?"

Nathan looked at the impossible image, knowing full well who it was. "Why'd you come like that?"

"You would prefer something more lyrical? A talking fish perhaps?"

"I prefer we end dis." Nathan snapped. "You had your fun. You had your show. Let me go."

Joshua-Satan smiled. "You may be interesting, Nathan, but you're not a lot of fun."

"Everybody's got an opinion." Nathan said, then turned and walked away.

Nathan came to in his chair with a weight on his chest. Opening his eyes, he saw Murphy looking into his face, his forepaws planted firmly on Nathan's chest. "Mmmmph. Murphy?"

Murphy yowped and jumped down to the floorboards. He looked at Nathan with inscrutable blandness. "You still talk?"

"Yowp."

"So, it was all a dream, den?"

"Yearrow."

"Quiet, you. Go eat." Murphy threw his tail in the air and walked into the house. Nathan grabbed the armrests of his rocker and pulled himself up straight. He looked around. In the darkness lightning bugs had come out and were spread across the marsh to the east, riding on air as thick as honey.

There was no sign of anyone else. Leeway, the Devil had said. Nathan snorted, recent memories of devils and talking cats beginning to fade. The war was a long time ago. He had the Medal of Honor, and a pension, and friends. He had the Pilot's Association and his visits to Japan, the fishing trips with Horii and his family. His dreams were untroubled, and his life worth much more than ten pounds of rice. The end of the world would not be his worry. ☞

— For Jefferson De Blanc and James Swett

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## CURIOSITIES

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### *FATHER OF THE AMAZONS,* BY PETE LEWIS (?) (1961)

**R**IGHT OFF the bat you know you're not dealing with the majors when the spine and the title page don't agree on who wrote the book. "Pete Lewis" or "Peter J. Crown," whichever, is responsible for one of the more...interesting bits of space-age erotica to come from the early 1960s — if, in fact, you can call it erotic. Frankly, if the core of this one were any less soft, you could scratch it with Jell-O, but what can you expect from a publisher called Kozy Books?

The near-palindromic hero, Rev Oliver, is captain of Deep Space Probe A18-17 in the year 2607, with a crew of three (handsome) men and one (beautiful) woman. Of course, this being 1961 and Kozy being what it was, the woman seduces all the men (off-screen), then decides she

can't take the pressure and runs off. Yeah.

As if that weren't enough to get your pulse pounding, their guidance system screws up, sending them hopelessly off-course to — wait for it — the planet of the Amazons, and he's the only survivor. No, really!

Of course, they treat him like a wimp. Of course, he resents being treated the way he treated "girls" back home. And of course, some of them fall in love with him. And I suppose they have some kind of sex, although the only way to tell is that Lewis/Crown's sentences get shorter.

As writing, well, one is tempted to wax critical, but one will restrain oneself. As an artifact, it certainly displays a reasonable level of Coolness, if you're into High Weirdness. ☞

—Bud Webster

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